UNQUENCHED FIRE

ALICE GERSTENBERG

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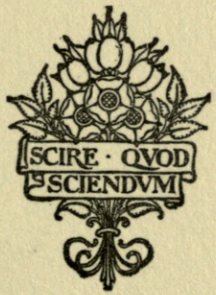
A Novel

BY

ALICE GERSTENBERG



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To My Mother

IN APPRECIATION OF HER NOBILITY OF HEART,
MIND AND SOUL
LOVINGLY AND REVERENTLY
DEDICATED

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PART ONE

THE VALLEY OF INDECISION

UNQUENCHED FIRE

CHAPTER I

"He has neither money nor position," said Mrs. Van Mueller with the faintest shrug of her still beautiful shoulders. "He is merely clever."

Jane Carrington stopped pulling her rose to pieces and flashed a quick look of interest at her hostess.

"'Gay Gordon came riding fair Janie to see'?" she asked lightly. "Well, if he 's clever enough not to coo, let 's have him. I 've heard I 'm beautiful till I feel like giving the next complimenter both point and edge of the Prince's poniard. You see, I still have the property dagger. Look at them," she added, humorously indicating the laughing group of admirers about her. "Every one of them tells

me I was simply stunning in that brown suit, and not one has the moral courage to say whether I acted the part of the Prince with any semblance of humanity or whether I was a perfect stick. They don't know in what danger they 've been for the last five minutes."

"Most of us are glad to be told that we are beautiful, my dear," said Mrs. Van Mueller. "However, I shall warn Mr. Gordon to shuffle his adjectives before he is introduced," and with that she moved away, a stately, white-haired figure among the chattering throng.

"It has taken me some time to reach you, Jane," said an easy voice at her elbow. "I must add my congratulations."

"You, too, Brutus?" replied Jane with a slight start, for which she mentally took herself to task. "I did n't know you were here."

"Mrs. Van Mueller made me buy a ticket."

"Ah, that fine sense of charity!"

"Yes," — carelessly — "I am extremely interested in — all forms of philanthropy."

Jane smiled wickedly, glancing over the bevy of white débutantes behind Walter Scribner, and then letting her eyes rest on the amateur stage at the far end of the mirrored ballroom. The green curtains had stuck, as amateur curtains usually do, and were still parted, revealing the tiny set, the tottering wings and the scattered petals from the girls' bouquets. As she looked the smile faded, and her eyes darkened with some powerful emotion.

"What is it, Jane?" Walter Scribner's voice was low, shrewdly sympathetic, and his eyes were full of a curious interest as he watched Jane's averted face. Evidently there were unplumbed possibilities there.

Suddenly she turned, facing him defiantly, her little hands doubled into white kid fists, her satined foot patting the floor.

"It would shock all these good friends of mine to death if I should jump up and down and shriek, would n't it?" she demanded. "If I ripped up a few of these nice sugared con-

ventions and cut through the pretty-pretty adjectives and got down to an honest, straight-from-the-shoulder opinion? Or have n't these friends an opinion: are their minds all meringue? Is there no one with courage enough to tell me whether I 'm bad or good in my part, and *why?* I slave for weeks learning it, thinking it out, rehearsing it, and to-night when I play it they call me — pretty!"

Scribner laughed at the small tempest — Jane was so emotional — and patted her arm consolingly.

"You look wonderful when you storm, Jane," he said with the air of a connoisseur. "Of course being beautiful is awfully hard on you, but really, you know, you ought to bear up. We enjoy it, even if you don't."

She put her hands to her ears and turned to escape, but Mrs. Van Mueller blocked her way.

"Jane, this is Mr. Gordon."

"Oh, how do you do," she answered fever-

ishly, placing a hot, trembling hand in his cool palm.

"I do very well to gain an audience with so subtle an actress," he answered gravely.

"Oh!" she gasped, "Oh!" and was lost in confusion.

Wondering somewhat at her embarrassment, Bryce Gordon took the conversation into his own hands, and gave her opportunity to recover. He had a quiet, reserved way about him that was quite in keeping with the tired look in his eyes. The weary lines in his face, his shabby clothes, his lax attitude, spoke of poverty and failure.

"You were the only intelligent player in the cast," he continued evenly. "Some of the others have pleasing personalities, but they were taught how to interpret their lines. Your work not only showed original thought, but was spontaneous, too. The pity was that—"

"Was what? Tell me," exclaimed Jane quickly, as he paused.

"Well, you lost force in your climax because you expended too much emotion at the opening of the play. That is n't so much a fault of technique as it is inexperience."

"Mr. Gordon's opinion is to be valued," remarked Mrs. Van Mueller kindly. "He is a writer."

"A writer!" Jane's eyes dilated. Writers were not a part of her world. "Oh, don't stop — go on!"

Her eagerness drew Gordon to her, excluding the older woman, who drew in her thin lips coldly as she moved away. Mrs. Van Mueller was not anxious to encourage one of her daughter's friends into an intimacy below her social level, and, after all, this man was only a scribbler. Jane, on the contrary, was fascinated by the new type, so different from the men she knew, and more than delighted to know him better.

"Tell me about your work," she pleaded, with naïve admiration in her eyes. "I know

so little about your world. What have you written?"

"Essays on English poets and a few magazine stories are the only stuff of mine in print," replied Gordon with a smile at her enthusiasm. "Literature is only jam, you know; bread and butter is won by very different labor."

"Don't waste time on literature, then," she said frivolously; "write trash — that's what sells, is n't it?"

"The only difficulty is that I still have a conscience," he laughed. "I 'm afraid I could n't do the society novel, any more than I could screw myself to the 'Bang!-Bang!-and-two-more-redskins-bit-the-dust!' style of romance. That sort of thing is a trade, just as much as blacksmithing, and rather than apprentice myself there I 'd — raise rutabagas for a living."

"I wish I could do either!" said Jane with sudden wistfulness. "Yes, either, so long as it was honest. This," and she waved an expressive hand around the crowded ballroom,

" is such an everlasting lie. I must disguise my hand, finesse it as if I were playing bridge, and some day when some poor wretch is n't looking snare him into matrimony. Are n't rutabagas better than that? "

" You 'd tire of them. Even the Chosen People could n't stand manna forever and yearned for quail on toast."

" Would I? "

Her tone was deep and vibrant, her fringed dark eyes with a flash in them turned full on his. Gordon was unaccountably thrilled. Vivacious, responsive, spontaneous, she seemed to give so much of herself, and yet, after all, gave so little. Eager to solve the problem of her nature, he made the mistake of using *oratio directa.*

" What are you? " he asked, leaning forward, frankly searching her. But the flash faded, and only tantalizing laughter remained as he gazed.

" Ah, that 's telling! . . . I 'm sure you 've

written other things. What are you at now?"

He saw that he had frightened the butterfly and that for a time there would be no more confidences.

"If you insist, I confess to a play."

"Oh!" Again her eyes filled with warm shadows. "What about?"

"The inevitability of fate."

"You believe in that?"

"Look for yourself," he answered with a smile. "Of course you're a princess in Egypt now, but I warn you it's the same in the wilderness. Can't you see it plainly here?"

"I do, and it nearly makes me a predestinated, foreordinated and damned Methodist. I had hoped you had some more appetizing solution."

"Appetizing!" Gordon made a wry face.

"No!" disclaimed Jane swiftly. "Don't you dare to convince me of the nauseousness of the dose. I won't believe it — yet. Surely if one has ability, courage and patience, circum-

stances can't always hold the whip over one's back. There must be a chance somewhere."

"Does acting mean so much to you?" Gordon was beginning to understand her, and she knew it was useless to challenge him. She answered simply:

"I 'm going to be an actress some day."

"Don't."

"Why?"

"Acting, like playwriting, is lowering buckets into empty wells and drawing nothing up."

"I thought you 'd encourage, instead of being a wet blanket."

"Perhaps I 've seen too much of the life. Remember the children of Israel and the fleshpots of Egypt."

Her eyes lost some of their light of interest. Gordon felt her drawing away from him, felt her growing again less magnetic, more complex, exasperatingly interesting.

"Do you care so much about it?"

But he had forfeited her confidence again, and she laughed irrelevantly.

"Merely a girl's vanity," she said, turning lightly away. And that was all. A moment later Bryce Gordon was walking down the steps of the brilliant house into the frosty night, and Jane Carrington was again holding court in the ballroom.

"Hello, Jane!"

"How do you do, Harry." She was polite rather than cordial — the boy was one of an unimportant dozen always at her heels.

"I 've been dodging trains for hours trying to reach you. Say, you were ripping to-night — corking."

"Really, did you like it?" Was it possible that Harry had seen what she meant to convey in her part? Her voice softened as she spoke and his eyes lit up with the glad look of a praised puppy.

"Sure. Where 'd you get that swell cap and quill, and the velvet doublet?"

"Oh!" sighed Jane, "I had the costume made."

"There was enough gold on it to run the mint for a week. You're the most extravagant girl in the bunch."

"I?"

"Well, I know a fellow who doesn't dare send you flowers for less than five, because all the rest are spending more."

"I value one rose of good will more than the biggest dozen of American Beauties ever sent by convention — tell the fellow I would wear the rose."

The boy looked at her curiously, and suddenly Jane realized that he was no longer a boy. She cast about for a light remark to break the tension, but for once her wits did not respond swiftly enough, and Harry spoke in an odd, husky voice.

"If — if you feel that way about the flowers," he stammered, "do you think you could — get along with less clothes, too?"

It was quite time to call a halt to this sort of thing, and Jane smiled gayly at him.

"Hardly in the same proportion," she flashed, and left him blushing — a boy still.

The next morning when one full-blown American Beauty arrived with his card in the box, she marked the card "dangerous" and slipped it into the innocent looking pigeon-hole of the desk that held her heart's ledger.

Jane's ledger was a sadly matter-of-fact affair, well-filled with a neat list of devotees labeled with assorted adjectives. Convalescents were there, along with the cured, the hopeless, the sentimental or platonic; and one card at which she sometimes looked soberly, inscribed "beyond control."

Walter Scribner's card she reflected over, and finally marked it "difficult." Their conversation in the alcove of the dining-room over the midnight supper after the play had ended unsatisfactorily.

That very day *Town Chat* had had a sting-

ing paragraph about them, and Jane had coolly taken the clipping out of her enameled vanity case for Scribner's benefit. He put aside his salad plate to take the slip from her hands.

"Jane Carrington's hanker for the spot-light has caused her to train her horse for fake mishaps. She was thrown one morning in the park just as Walter Scribner rode by. Now it was Scribie's first ride since his return to the Windy City, and not aware that acrobatic Jane was playing possum, he gallantly rushed to the rescue and held her fainting in his arms. Is she trying to capture Walter? This is her third season, you know, and Scribie passed her up at the close of her first for the next batch of débutantes. He has been at that kind of wooing for some twenty years. Try somebody else, Jane; not even fainting damsels can angle Scribie."

The paragraph was cruelly wrong, of course. Her horse had shied at a wheelbarrow in the park and had thrown her because she had been careless with the length of her stirrup. A new stable-boy had buckled it wrong and she had been in too great a hurry and too confident of her horsewomanship to have it corrected. She

had known how to fall without much danger, and was quite calm when Scribner had reached her — had laughed away his solicitude, a bit glad of the opportunity to show him how cool she could be. Only in one thing was it right — she was piqued by the way he had stopped his attentions. In love with him? Not for a minute. But he was a beau of forty who each year chose one of the prettiest débutantes, brought a flirtation to a serious point and then suddenly left for a southern or western trip on account of his health. When the sky cleared he was free to play the game with another little fool. Jane blushed still when she wakened at night and remembered that three years ago she had been the fool. Now she wanted to make him pay.

Walter read the clipping through with unruffled attention and then, tearing it into bits, commented:

"Some man deserves a thrashing for that."

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

"Some are born to lie, some achieve lying and some have lies thrust upon them, you know," he went on, resuming his salad. "Shall I go around and kill the editor?"

"Oh, no. I don't demand such sacrifices. People are apt to be so bloody when they are killed, and you might have to send your coat to the cleaner's."

"Don't let that deter you. Any sacrifice for your sake —" He left the sentence unfinished.

Jane struck openly.

"But the reference to you and the débutantes is quite true. Leslie is not going to the theater with you."

For the fraction of a second Walter silently resented her thrust, and as silently decided to accept it.

"Your charming débutante sister," he answered suavely, "has already promised to let me take her."

"So she told me. That is why."

"I was not aware that I stood so low in your esteem."

"Don't ask me to recall the similar invitation I accepted three years ago."

"Then you have n't forgotten that we saw a great deal of each other your first season?"

Jane winced. She was no match for Scribner at this game, and she ate her salad in silence. Blandly he resumed:

"Suppose we renew our old — friendship." The pause was a delicate triumph of artistry.

"I 'm too busy" — this over an averted shoulder.

"Take Leslie's place and come with me."

"I am not so desperate for invitations."

"Very well — then I shall take your sister."

"She will telephone you she is not well enough to go."

"Then I shall call to inquire after her health and bore you for the rest of the evening."

"I shall be out."

"Then I shall call again."

Jane turned laughing eyes to him.

"'T is! . . . 'T ain't!" she mocked. "Really, Walter, if I were not personally indifferent I could not discuss this matter with you so boldly. Leslie is very young and your flattery is not too wholesome. Please discontinue your attentions to her."

She was rising to go, the matter quite settled, when Leslie, a dark-eyed slip of a girl, came lightly towards their corner.

"Father and mother are waiting to take us home," she announced; "unless Scribie here wants to get a taxi for us later."

"We are going at once," replied Jane with all the authority of an elder sister. "Come, dear."

Scribner remained where they left him, slipping his watch-charm between his immaculate fingers. Decidedly, Jane would be worth conquering. She was positively handsome at times.

In the big tonneau Jane's admiring family

were rehearsing for her a string of carefully treasured compliments. It was Jane's hour of triumph, for, after all, the genuine admiration of your own is dearer than that of the rest of the world.

"I am very happy," said Mrs. Carrington, drawing her ermine coat about her as the chauffeur opened the car door before their gray stone house, standing ghost-like at daybreak on the lake-front. "You are making all the success I had hoped for; is n't she, John?"

"You had 'em all guessing," confirmed Mr. Carrington, giving a fatherly pull to a tempting long curl on Jane's neck.

"Goodness, daddy," she said with a responding pat on his cheek, "you should n't be so careless. For anything you knew to the contrary that curl might have come off in your fingers. What would you have done then?"

"Off!" he echoed with mock dismay. "Do you young things lay pitfalls like that for your trusting dads? I should never have had faith

in you again." He laughed, turning to Mrs. Carrington. "Mother, do you remember when I first found out you crimped your bangs?"

She made a little gesture of irritation.

"Really, I do not," she answered; "and, John, I wish you would remember not to call me 'mother.' It always reminds me of cabbage."

Mr. Carrington said nothing, but pulled out his keys and opened the heavy door. Silence, he had learned, was often his best weapon at home.

"You did very well with Mr. Scribner to-night," went on Mrs. Carrington, once inside the house. "I am glad to see you renewing your acquaintance there."

"Why?" Jane bristled instantly.

"He has money and social position —"

"And is a good catch!" finished Jane acidly. "The inevitable stalk, I suppose."

"Tut, tut, girls!" remonstrated Mr. Carrington. "Run along to bed and don't hurry

Jane in making up her mind, my dear. She 's pretty enough yet."

Jane walked slowly up the stairs, all her gayety suddenly vanished. Was Walter Scribner, after all, her only goal? What did the dawn of day mean, now that the play was over? What else was there to plan for and live for, now that the play was over?

Soft, kitteny little Leslie cuddled down under the silken covers of her sister's bed, and snuggled up in Jane's protecting arm.

"Scribie asked me something about you," she confessed. "He wanted to know if you had ever been in love. I said I knew you had liked people but I did n't think you 'd ever had a grand passion. Was that right?"

Jane laughed. "You funny little puss! Well, it will do, though it is never wise to know as much as that, openly."

"Have you?"

"Have I what?"

"Been in love?"

"Silly! No. Don't believe I ever will. I want too much of people, and then when they don't live up to it, I 'm disappointed. Your sister is getting too old and wise."

Leslie pinched Jane's cheek affectionately.

"Well, when he finds you — the right man, I mean — he 'll have a dandy. I wonder where he is now?"

Jane tried to go to sleep, but the careless words rang in her ears and she, too, wondered where the man she could really love might be, and whether he might dimly be thinking of her.

CHAPTER II

When the ladies of spur-and-shield days grew weary of court they could retire for a season to a nunnery to drink milk and recover their digestions; but in Chicago there was no such respite. The city was hurry-mad: its men chained to desk and telephone, its women perpetually rushed to the verge of nervous prostration. The very air seemed tense, the breathless streets impatient of the uplifted hand of the crossing-policemen. He who marched with that procession must keep up or be crushed. Once down, the crowd swept over the place where one had been without even the formality of scattering sawdust.

Jane had elected to march, and march she did, her handsome head held high. If she brooded in the seclusion of her own room occasionally, no one was the wiser; if she

wrenched at the bars of her spirit, she did it decently in private. Outwardly she was the same gay Jane, seen everywhere, bizarre as ever, keeping a shrewdly protecting eye on her younger sister and handling Walter Scribner as an angler argues with a wary old trout.

To-day Mrs. Van Mueller's doors were open again, and the familiar horde of five o'clock fashionables were crowding her brilliant reception rooms. Every one was there — the Van Mueller house, on the lower Lake Shore Drive, was too valuable a picture-frame to be missed. Those with social positions to keep, equally with the climbers who counted the invitation a victory, chattered and drank tea and showed their gowns. Here was the round, fat collector of antique china, cozy as her beloved teapots; there the grande dame who modeled her methods on Madame de Staël, and knew her court history as a chemist knows reagents. Here chatted, in a my-dearing group, a simple, virtuous, lovable house-mother who

could not invent an indiscretion if she should try, a two-tongued serpent of a woman with venom dripping from every honeyed word, and a high-bred aristocrat, as coldly brilliant as her jewels. There was the pretty girl posing for her prettiness; the bizarre, homely girl dressing to accentuate her homeliness; the officious woman, the unassuming, the courageous, the modest, the bold, the serious, the frivolous, the highly mental, the vividly physical — all rubbing elbows, jamming hats, catching feathers, stepping on trains, dropping handkerchiefs, raising their voices to a shriek to be heard above the ceaseless chatter — there, in short, was the society that Jane so hated and of which she was an integral part.

Leslie Carrington, intrenched behind the chocolate urn, flushed with heat and exertion, — for the guests were seeking what they could devour, — tore off a white kid glove, stained from the dripping spout, and looked around for relief. She had been at her post for over

an hour and it was hard work. One of the women glanced at her appraisingly.

"Who is that pretty girl?" she asked her neighbor, and the neighbor's reply held a tinge of scorn.

"Don't you know Leslie Carrington?" she asked. "You must have read about her début. Every one was there. I got out of a sick bed to go."

"Jane Carrington's young sister? I know Jane, of course. I've been on two bazaar committees with her, and been run into the ground with her high-handed ways. Leslie looks like her without being so stunning."

"She isn't the kind to make the hit Jane did when she came out three years ago."

"There she is now. My dear, will you look at her clothes!"

Jane was skillfully managing a direct route to the chocolate urn, and several tongues did not hesitate to comment upon her black tailor suit, fashionable in cut, but very evidently de-

signed for morning wear. Leslie gasped when she saw it.

"My goodness, Jane! How could you dare to come dressed like that?"

"Listen to our little débutante," laughed Jane. "Of course I have dared, Leslie, because I have taken in a lecture, a study class, an informal luncheon, a music lesson, two meetings and a studio tea on my way here; and have just arrived like a rescuing angel in time to take you from this table. Put some powder on your nose."

She slipped her gold chatelaine into her sister's lap and then went to find another débutante.

"Hester Pope! Are n't you pretty to-day in that peach color! Come along; be a darling and relieve Leslie of that inevitable chocolate. The child is wilting."

"Gladly, Miss Carrington," answered Hester, quite willing to return favor for compliment, and Leslie was freed from bondage.

That duty performed, Jane secured an olive sandwich and a cup of black coffee and settled down in a conveniently conspicuous window-seat to enjoy it. Meantime Leslie drifted away and was presently found by Walter Scribner.

"Oh, Scribie!" she begged, "do get me something nice and naughty — I 'm so hungry and so tired! — some punch, and if there 's any salad left I want a whole big plateful."

"With pleasure, Miss Leslie, if you will agree to make my peace with your sister."

"With Jane? Why? — Oh, I know. She does n't think you 're good for me. Maybe that 's why I like you; but if you don't feed me I shall pretend I 'm a lion in Lincoln Park and roar and not like you at all."

"That would be a calamity indeed," he smiled, and presently reappeared, laden.

They were comfortably aside from the rest, in a sort of little back-water provided by an alcove, a tall Chinese lamp and a sweeping

fern. In comparison with the rest of the stifling, crowded rooms it gave them a sense of seclusion of which Scribner began to take discreet advantage.

He had made up his mind since the night of the amateur play that Jane, rather than Leslie, was his game. Pretty and kitteny as the little girl was, she would never have the keen mind of her older sister; the skill in carrying off honors, the dominance that he felt his wife should show. Perhaps, after all, it was time he was marrying; and if so, Jane would be the better investment. Besides, he had got a thrill out of fencing with her that he had thought himself too jaded to feel again. So he smiled with open amusement at Leslie when she commanded: "Now talk to me."

"What a child you are, Leslie," he said indulgently. "You really like this sort of thing?"

"Oh, I love it! All the pretty dresses and the pretty faces and the sparkle — and every-

body 's been so lovely to me. I 'm just crazy about it!"

"They 've been so lovely to you, have they? Of course. You 're a good person to be lovely to — the rich Miss Leslie Carrington; pretty, smartly dressed, an effective part of the tableau picture Mrs. Van Mueller is staging. What would they be to you if you were only little Miss Nobody, without any prospects?"

"My real friends would be just the same to me," defended Leslie swiftly.

"Who, for example?"

"Oh, Hester would, and Josephine, and all the girls — everybody, I guess."

"You remember when Louise Hetherton's father lost all his money in oats? Where 's Louise now?"

"Why — why — I have n't seen Louise for a long time!"

"No, probably you have n't. She 's earning her bread down on Twenty-Second Street and

you'd not recognize her if you met her on the street face to face."

"I would too! I would too!" retorted Leslie hotly. "I'll go and see her to-morrow. What's her address, and how do you get there? How dare you say such things to me, Scribie?"

Indignantly Leslie pulled out a little ivory memorandum tablet and pencil, but Scribner twisted his mouth into a cynical smile.

"Have you ever heard of Twenty-Second Street before?" he asked coolly, making no move to give her the address.

"Why, yes," said Leslie, puzzled. "It's somewhere on the South Side, isn't it?"

"Yes, my dear," he answered, "it's somewhere on the South Side, but I wouldn't advise you to go there to see Louise."

Leslie stared at him a moment and then, moved by something she could not explain, blushed painfully and laid the tablet down in her lap.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, and her young face was very sober.

"No?" Again Scribner twisted his mouth into that smile that had no mirth in it. "But it's vastly interesting. Do you want me to go on?"

For the moment Leslie had no reply, and, taking her silence for consent, he continued.

"Louise Hetherton was dropped by these society women," — he made a little gesture towards the chattering throng — "and forgotten in a week. Old Hetherton shot himself, you remember, when the crash came. Mrs. Hetherton went into hysterics and then into nervous prostration. Louise didn't know how to earn a dollar. She clerked in a big State Street store for a while, on six dollars a week, which is probably what you spend on handkerchiefs; and you can imagine that that hardly sufficed to support herself and the old lady. She learned several things while she was in that store, and when they finally fired her

for incompetence she — well, she went out on Twenty-Second Street, and I can't give you her address. That 's how much you can depend on the people you say have been so lovely to you."

Poor little Leslie had gone red and white by turns during Scribner's brief narrative, and although she did not yet comprehend its full significance, she understood enough to repel and disgust her.

"I don't believe it," she said uncertainly. "How do you know?"

"I — met Louise the other night, with Paul Henderson, but I 'd heard about it before."

"You knew before — you knew all the time? Why did n't you help her yourself?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I 'm not an angel. Besides, if one went into the rescuing business there would be no money left to buy Leslie Carrington violets; and that would hurt her feelings dreadfully. . . . I 've told you only one story out of a dozen that I know. The point is that society

is a business, just as much as pawnbroking — you give so much and take so much in return, or more if you can get it. And if you were n't in a position where you could return their favors, all these women that you say have been so lovely to you would drop you like a hot potato. . . . I 'm telling you all this for your good, my dear, innocent little girl. You 'll learn it sometime, and the sooner you find out the better it will be for you."

Leslie looked down silently with a graver expression than he had ever seen on her gay little face, and he watched her attentively. If she took his frank cynicism as an insult, it made no difference; there were plenty of others to play with. If she took it as an expression of his superior wisdom — well, it was not unattractive to play the rôle of mentor with a charming débutante for a pupil. Perhaps she might even be seriously attracted, curiously won by that spice of deviltry which often gives a man added charm in a woman's eyes. If she

were — what of it? She would get over it eventually. He waited for her move.

She rose suddenly to her feet and put her ivory tablet away.

"I don't think I want to be wise," she said with a little quiver in her voice. "Take me back to Jane — or, no, I'll find her myself. And — Mr. Scribner, I'm not your dear."

Before he could answer she slipped out of the alcove and, thrusting her way through the thinning crowd, sought for Jane.

The elder Miss Carrington had not long enjoyed her sandwich and coffee in peace. Before she disposed of two bites there was a greeting in her ears.

"Hello, Jane! Haven't seen you for ages. What have you been doing?"

"I'm getting interested in bookbinding — fascinating work. Won't you join our class?"

"When do you meet?"

"Friday mornings before the Thomas Concert."

"Oh, that's lovely; I haven't a thing for Friday mornings. Take me down, will you?"

"I'd love to. I'll bring the electric around at half-past eleven for you."

"All right — good-by."

The stream moved on and swept the prospective bookbinder away. In turn, a small old woman laid a kindly hand on Jane's muff.

"Good afternoon, my dear."

"How do you do, Mrs. Kaufman. I am glad to see you."

"Is your mother here?"

"Yes; she is receiving in the front room."

"Then I missed her. Isn't this a lovely affair?"

"Oh, yes!" Jane's voice held more conventional enthusiasm than conviction. "You must enjoy going out."

The old lady's face lightened up with a charming youthful expression.

"My dear child, you must not think that age steals our pleasures. I 'm a very gay old lady, younger in heart even than you, I am sure."

"You are a remarkable woman, Mrs. Kaufman."

"Not remarkable; merely modern. Tell me, dear, are you interested in Japanese prints?"

"I know nothing about them."

"Then you ought to learn. We have a class meeting every Wednesday morning at my house. We are three old ladies in the class, but we want girls of your age, too, to inspire us. Do come next week, dear."

"Wednesday morning? Why, I 'd love to."

"We shall expect you, then — good-by."

"I shall be a prompt scholar, at least. . . . How do you do, Mrs. Norse."

"Miss Carrington, would n't you be interested in our French class? We converse with Madame every Friday morning."

"I 'm sorry, but I have a bookbinding class on that day."

"What a shame. Perhaps, then, you would join our German class on Tuesdays?"

Jane shook her head. "I 've a music lesson at ten."

"Then you can just make it, for we meet at eleven at my house. So glad!" and the devotee of languages gave place to a recent bride.

"I 've just been persuading the girls who are contemplating marriage to take some cooking lessons. Don't you think that 's a lovely idea?"

"Do you suspect me of contemplating?" laughed Jane.

"One is never sure of you. Come, though, whether you 're contemplating or not, and learn how to tell your cook what to make. You really must join; all your friends are coming, and we make perfectly dear little loaves of bread, just enough for one."

"If we are contemplating, should n't we learn to make them for two?"

"That sounds dreadfully suspicious, my dear."

Jane laughed. "Oh, I 'm not interested, my dear!"

"Come once, anyway. Monday at eleven. We eat at luncheon what we have cooked."

"I don't deserve such punishment."

The bride's answering giggle was drowned by the harsh voice of a masculine looking girl in a pea-green silk gown that accentuated her sallow skin.

"Here, Jane Carrington; you 're just the person I want to talk to. We 're going to give a play. You made such a hit in the 'Prince' that we want you for the lead — it's a love play—all girls—he and she and broken hearts and all that sort of thing — in our ballroom — dance afterwards — all for charity — a crippled hospital for children — I mean a hospital for crippled children — somewhere on

the West Side — three-dollar or five-dollar tickets — better make it five — social success, you know — want you to be in it."

When this extraordinary and entirely commaless sentence was completed she paused for breath and looked at Jane with a scowl that held no unfriendliness.

"You angel!" said Jane delightedly. "Of course I'll come." There was real warmth in her voice.

"Knew you would," said the other in a business-like way. "First rehearsal at our house Thursday at ten. Have you seen Dorothy? Thought this was the best place to find the troupe. I'm manager." And with that she plowed on her way, looking for her "support."

"Miss Carrington, will you be on the finance committee for — "

Jane greeted the newcomer with a preoccupied smile, her mind still on the play.

"Sweet of you to ask me, but I could n't, really."

"I have n't told you yet what it is for."

"It would n't make any difference, for I simply could n't," laughed Jane. "I am giving a luncheon on Monday, studying German and music on Tuesday, hearing about Japanese prints on Wednesday, bookbinding on Friday, singing on Saturday, and rehearsing on Thursday! Oh, I really could n't. But it was so nice of you to ask me." And Jane passed on, unmistakably happy.

"Miss Carrington, how do you do!" smiled another guest very sweetly. "You are fond of tailor-mades, are n't you?"

"Oh yes, very," rejoined Jane with designed enthusiasm. "I prefer simple lines."

The elaborately gowned woman, drawing her ruffles aside, remarked to the next woman she met: "That Jane Carrington is too horribly conceited for words. Simple lines indeed! She certainly succeeds in getting them and showing her figure. Think of coming to a reception in a tailor-made!"

"Perhaps she is creating a new fashion," answered the other woman.

"Well, the self assurance of some of these girls is simply outrageous. Did you see what *Town Chat* had about her this week? It was simply delicious."

Jane heard the remark, and smiled dryly. Her eyes had once been innocently trusting, like Leslie's, but long ago they had been opened and this sort of talk slid off her like water off a duck's back. She worked her way towards the drawing-room and presently was arrested by the voice of the girl in the pea-green gown who now was selling tickets to an extravagantly gowned woman.

"What is it for — crippled children? No; sorry, I don't care for any. I hate crippled things."

The brutality of the last remark brought Jane to a stop and she looked squarely into the eyes of the jewel-bedecked speaker.

"You might at least help to alleviate their

sufferings," she said directly, and the woman floundered for a retort while Jane passed on with a scornful smile.

"Jane Carrington!" gasped the woman, after her retreating form. "Is n't she impudent! Oh, well, — you might send me some tickets, anyway. What? A play with society girls in it? Oh! why did n't you say so? Five dollars? Oh, that's nothing, send me six."

Jane suddenly felt physically and mentally wearied. She had gained the drawing-room at last. It was sickeningly hot, the flowers heavily fragrant, the music louder, the chatter more incessant. She glanced about. There was her well-groomed, aristocratic mother, showing no signs of fatigue, graciously helping to receive Mrs. Van Mueller's stream of guests; there were all the others — animated, gay, apparently enjoying it all. Jane felt that her own viewpoint must be at fault. Perhaps if she had taken time to dress more gayly she might have been in a better mood. She ought

not to remain now that she could do justice neither to herself nor to others. She would go home and try to find that other self that took a joy in these things.

As she moved towards the door, Leslie, with her wraps on, slipped her hand through Jane's arm, and the older girl, looking down, was startled at the weariness of her face.

"Why, Leslie dear, you look like a ghost! What 's the matter?"

Leslie cuddled her sister's arm closer against her side, and when she spoke it was almost with a sob.

"Oh, Janie, let 's go home. I 'm so tired — so tired. I don't ever want to see a reception again."

Jane glanced at her again, keenly, and sighed. It had to come sometime — this first weariness and disillusion; though she had hoped it would not come so soon for Leslie. Suddenly she remembered one August day when, riding along the boulevard, she had seen

the first soft flurry of yellow autumn leaves flutter down from a willow, and the sharp prophecy of winter that had swiftly constricted her heart.

Discreetly she refrained from asking questions; and when they reached home she tucked Leslie into her own bed and kissed her with unwonted tenderness.

CHAPTER III

So the winter passed, in alternate moods of gayety and rebellion, and spring came to Chicago. The fate in charge of Jane's affairs turned over, rubbed her eyes, and added a totally unexpected pawn to the chessboard where Jane was queen.

"I'm tired of this counter-checking," said the old witch, being a woman and unable to refrain from cheating even when playing a solitaire game. "Let's see what you will do with him, my lady."

On the boulevards bunches of violets decked the muffs, saucy hats of extravagant crowns and erratic brims perched on the newest coiffures, and a daring robin sang his cheery bourgeois tune in the elms of Lincoln Park. In the zoo, old Cæsar padded up and down his cage resentfully, pausing to sniff at the gate-

way that led to out-of-doors and throw back his head in a deep, grating roar of balked longing.

Jane padded up and down the cage of her spirit in much the same fashion. She longed to get away to the country where she could rest and reflect, but in the well-groomed country estates she visited the very earth was unnatural, and Jane might as well have tried to sleep in a tree. Mrs. Van Mueller never allowed time to drag at her house-parties in her expensive Wisconsin château, and always tactfully expected her guests to do their share in making the summer season a success.

Jane and Leslie arrived at Fairview fully prepared to hold their own in the conventional dress parade and the conventional polite sword-play. The girls, carefully selected for their charms, watched each other out of the corners of their eyes, as co-envoys in a truce watch the faces of their fellows; the extra-eligible

men that Mrs. Van Mueller always picked to be within range of her nondescript daughter, Margaret, assumed languid airs, as befitted the hunted.

Not that Margaret was in this game; although she was Leslie's own age, Mrs. Van Mueller was firm in her idea that she was still too young to consider marriage; but, before Margaret should take the field, her diplomatic mother was not at all averse to helping her daughter's chances by getting attractive Jane Carrington out of the way. So she made it her business to throw Jane and Walter Scribner together. This house-party, she calculated, should bring it off if Jane did not fail her.

As for Jane, she had angled her trout well. Walter Scribner's interest had been growing all through the spring, and as he became more eager she had drawn back — partly from deliberation and partly with a certain involuntary repulsion. Sooner or later, she told

herself, she might as well marry him — there seemed nothing else to do — and the achievement of netting a bachelor whom fifteen seasons had left uncaptured was not bad food for her vanity. Still she put it off and held him cleverly from the point, for a mixture of reasons that she herself could hardly have analyzed.

Yet she had come to the house-party quite aware of her hostess' benevolent intentions and, in certain moods, quite prepared to back her up. A touch, a word, might have thrown the balance of her indecision; and that touch came when the pawn upon which none of them reckoned appeared — the musician, Ludwig Darenbeck.

Darenbeck was a violinist whom Mrs. Van Mueller had engaged to play for the house-party, and although he was nominally a guest he was treated with perhaps a shade more courtesy than the butler by most of the young people. Jane had come upon him one morning

very early in the garden, where he had gone to feed the squirrels — his daily custom. He had been gruff at first, evidently expecting the usual patronage, but when Jane had met him with frank friendliness and open respect for his more-than-ordinary talent, he had thawed with startling swiftness.

"Mein Gott, Fräulein," he had said, "that is the first word — of — of Anerkennung I haf had in this place. It is go here and go there and, ach, Herr Darenbeck, come play those waltzes that are all barley-sugar — things to give to children; never the respect for the artist. Himmel! In Germany the Schulkinder have more Verständnis."

Jane smiled wryly.

"They're just thoughtless, Herr Darenbeck," she said. "And music is n't bred in the American nation as it is in the German. Last night — Schubert's 'Ständchen' — Mischa Elman himself could n't have interpreted it better."

"You know Mischa Elman?" he asked quickly.

"I never miss one of his performances when he is in this country," she answered. "You know how he plays Schubert, and especially that particular composition. But you make the violin sing even more."

The German hardly seemed to hear her praise. His blue eyes were focused very far away, although he was apparently looking down at the grass at his feet.

"I heard Mischa Elman in the Old Country," he said dreamily. "He played — ach, herrlich! He came to America, he made the great success. I, too, come — Ludwig Darenbeck — and I play 'That Mysterious Rag' on my fiddle to make old Anton Stradivarius turn over in his grave. Gnädiges! Fräulein, some day I play for you when the rest are gone on their picnics, and I show you what the violin can do — ja, ja?"

"I shall count it an honor if you will," said

Jane with sincerity, and from that moment they were friends. Often when the laughing crowd were gathered in the big, low-raftered living-room and the comfortable piazzas, Darenbeck played ostensibly for the party but in reality for Jane, who sat with misty eyes, relaxing herself to the music, dreaming marvelous dreams. Walter Scribner found her distrait and unapproachable at such times; and, although he tried to provoke her to jealousy by an open devotion to Betty Chamberlain, he did not even cause a flutter of her eyelids. She was bored with Scribner and the party, disgusted with herself, dissatisfied with everything. As slangy Harry Summers put it, Jane "had on a peach of a grouch."

One morning she refused to go sailing, pleading a headache; and when the gay crowd were only a white sail in the distance she slipped into a middy blouse and walked miles away to the woods.

A Wisconsin woodland is a beautiful place

— mossy, fragrant with pine, white with birches, threaded by tinkling, clinking little streams. Jane found some ripe dewberries and rolled their wild tartness on her tongue appreciatively; surprised a bluebird at his bath in a tiny pool; watched a gold-eyed frog with a white waistcoat as he caught his morning meal of flies; and had just puckered her mouth to whistle a gay little air when she walked around a rock and came point blank upon Ludwig Darenbeck.

"Märchenzauber! Eine Waldnymphe! Hier in Amerika!" He greeted her with a quizzical smile. "Look; I have found a kinsman of yours. I have piped to him and he has danced. Hush, now, and I will show."

Jane dropped on the fallen log beside him, in obedience to his gesture, and held her breath. He slipped his violin under his cheek and drew from it a long note — another — and Jane followed his eyes to where a gray squirrel was doubtfully descending the trunk of a great ash

near-by. The little beast was plainly interested in the music, which now dripped in liquid gold from his bow. Dappled sun among the leaves, sunny water crisped by wind, finches darting in the hedge, — that was what he played; and bit by bit the furry creature drew closer, pausing to sit up on its hind legs and chatter softly in answer. Jane watched it, fascinated. She had never been so close to a wild thing before, and when, finally, in one desperate burst of courage, it dashed up on Darenbeck's knee, close to the music that had called it, she could not restrain herself.

"Oh, the darling!" she cried, and in a flash the squirrel was gone.

"Oh, Englisch verscheucht es," said Darenbeck gravely, yet with a smile puckering the corners of his mouth. "I have talked to him in German and he has understood very well. . . . How did you like that Paganini last night?"

"Oh, it was wonderful," Jane answered

eagerly. "Play it again for me — won't you? I can hear it better out here."

He shook his head.

"No, Fräulein; it is not for the woods, even if I could play it on this poor fiddle, my second best, that I take only to the woods. Paganini was a genius. He wrote things that no one — no, not even I, Ludwig Darenbeck — may play — no one except himself, the master. But he did not write for the woods. He wrote for den Konzertsaal, for the people; and him, Paganini, the master, standing up there playing the 'Devil's Trill' for them all. Ja wohl — he wrote for that. Here we play him not; here we want a Wanderlied such as the Handwerksburschen sing in the woods or a Ringelreihen such as children have at their games, or a Vogelzwitschern to make him answer back — so?"

He played a few hushed notes and, sure enough, a brown thrush, cocking his head on one side, answered tentatively.

The genial German laughed like a boy and

Jane echoed him. It was impossible to be artificial with him. He got straight down through the husk to the woman beneath; simple himself, he had the gift of wakening an answering simplicity. Now he turned to her directly.

"And you," he said, "what do you here? They" — and he made a motion towards the house — "they dance and dress and giggle and make big eyes and know no more. But you have the ear for the music, Sie haben Gemüt, Sie hören mit dem Herzen. I have seen you when I play, when you thought no one was looking — the fire dies out of your eyes, you are like that bird yonder, if one put him in a cage."

Jane broke off a bit of bark.

"I 've always wanted to act, Herr Darenbeck," she said simply, "but father and mother think acting is dreadful. They want me to stay at home. They say it will break their hearts if I go."

"Ach, so!" rumbled the German. "So, so! And then?"

"Oh, I 'm to make a rich match and be a social leader, and carry on the traditions of the family," said Jane with a sorry grin. "And if you want to know what I think about it, it 's bother the family. But — you see, I 'm just waiting for an opportunity to come."

He looked at her keenly.

"If you were the ordinary girl," he said gravely, "I would say stay with the father and mother and make them happy — the stage is no place for you. But I see, no matter what you pretend to do, laugh or joke, you live in the acting. Your voice is song; you would make people laugh and cry with that voice. Listen — it is this on the violin — no, I will not try. You have the temperament — you would make the great actress — and, Fräulein, you should be out in the world doing the big things."

"How can I?" Jane's voice was sharp.

"You must go alone. You think you can sit and wait and opportunity will fall in your lap. Das ist nicht recht. You must go out and seek and work and love and suffer and weep, and then you will be the great artist."

"And suppose I fail? What can I do if I lose my faith in myself?"

The words were a cry of need. Jane had packed her trunk more than once to flee, and then had been mocked by the little devil of possible failure, possible laughter, possible scorn. Darenbeck shook his head.

"Pouf! That is every man's lot. Look at me playing the fiddle here — playing that verfluchte 'Mysterious Rag' when I have Paganini in my soul. I love music, I study, I save, I work and work, I come to this country and I cannot create, I can't write a bar. All my heart and soul is in the Fatherland. I am a failure — I, Ludwig Darenbeck. Now you come; you bring back the Schaffensdrang; you

inspire me again — and then you say how if you have no faith? You are what the little children call a fraidy-cat, Fräulein. Listen to me. The good God has made but a chosen few to be artists; but when he has one made, that artist must give up everything to his art. He has no family. He has no home. He has no duty. He is one with the stars; he is part of the universe; he is a god himself. That is a great artist."

The conviction in his voice stirred Jane to her depths and filled her with an ecstacy of power and courage.

"Oh, if I only could!" she breathed. "I must! I must! I don't mind the work or the struggle or failing at first. You have said enough to make me go in spite of everything."

"Think it over, Fräulein," he said gravely. "It is much to disobey your people; but if you are sure you can endure and win at last, I say to you, go; and the good God bless you."

When Jane and Darenbeck finally came out of the woods together and sauntered across the lawn they were in full view of the sailing party just returning for luncheon.

"Our artists seem to have been enjoying a tête-à-tête," commented Margaret Van Mueller. Her mother raised her eyebrows, not pleased with the evident truth of the girl's remark, and the sailing party laughed.

"Mr. Darenbeck looks quite human," said Betty Chamberlain sweetly, quite satisfied with herself.

"He adores her," piped up Leslie, proud of her big sister's ability to win devotion everywhere. "Have n't you noticed how he always looks at her when he plays?"

"He does, does he, little one?" said Walter in a low tone at her side. They were reconciled and he had tried no more mentor work with her.

"Yes, I can always tell when people are fond of Jane. Oh, yes I can."

"Does she like him?" ventured Walter.

"It took her a whole half hour to tell me last night what a fine but unappreciated musician he is. You know, Scribie, Jane can't always be thinking of you."

Clever little Leslie, to learn her game so well in one short débutante year. She knew the rules, and half suspected, as Walter moved abruptly away, that she had played a trump card. She was not wrong; for her remark, Darenbeck's manifest contentment, and Jane's unwonted gravity throughout the day, put Walter in a mood of jealousy that made him thoroughly uncomfortable. But he was his usual suave self, and it was not until Jane complained of weariness, after their first waltz together at Mrs. Raymond's dance that evening, that he made any move. Even then it was an innocent looking suggestion.

"It 's half-past eleven," he said, looking at his watch. "Jimmy Raymond's canoe is at the foot of the path, and I 'm always welcome

to use it. Suppose I take you home by lake. We 'll arrive just about the time the rest of the party get there."

The suggestion was grateful to Jane, wearied with the heat and the music, and she consented. Once launched, she almost forgot his existence. It was a still, clear night with a full moon reflected in dazzling silver on the dark water. Here and there the night was studded with pier lights, and the voices of crickets vied with the startled call of a whip-poor-will. Jane dipped her hands into the still water and listened to the lazy swish of his paddle without speaking. Suddenly Scribner broke the silence.

"Look at the moon," he said.

"Why?"

"It will give me more light to see how beautiful you are."

Jane hastily turned her face into the shadow.

"You are in a strange mood to-night," he continued in the subdued voice that usually

presages an intimate conversation. "I have never known you to be so silent."

"You have never known me at all," she replied in a tone as subdued as his.

"I thought I did your first year out, but since then you baffle comprehension. No one understands you."

Jane suddenly thought of Darenbeck and how well he had understood. The memory gave her a sense of cherished possession, but she restrained her elation under a tantalizing "No?"

"I could if you would let me."

"Perhaps."

"Have you ever let yourself be understood?"

"Sometimes."

"Tell me about yourself," he urged.

"Size of collar — "

Her mocking laughter exasperated him.

"Why will you not be serious?"

"Why should I?"

"You seemed pleased enough to come out here with me."

"Yes; it was hot in the ballroom."

"I am of no consequence, then?"

"Yes; you are convenient."

"You are acting," said Walter, digging his paddle deep into the water, his anger growing.

"No, I am just the ordinary, conventional woman."

"Ordinary! Conventional! Jane, what makes you behave this way? You are not like any woman I ever knew."

"Perhaps I go to a different tailor," said Jane lightly. "I must tell him what a compliment he has received from a person of your wide experience."

Scribner's hurt vanity was balanced by his desire to pin her down to a serious conversation and he went at her directly.

"What did Mr. Darenbeck say to you when you were in the woods together?"

"He played for me."

"They say you may be in love with him."

"Who says that?"

"Our friends at the house. They say that when he plays the whole expression of your face changes. It is true, for I have seen you."

"They think that a sign I love him?"

"Yes."

"That is absurd."

"He loves you."

"You are mistaken."

"You would deny it even if it were true."

"Your questioning is impertinent."

He had struck fire at last and he followed it up.

"Jane, you have played me fast and loose all season, and I am tired of it," he said earnestly, laying his paddle across the gunwales and leaning forward. "I sincerely want you to be serious now. . . . I have been trying at intervals during these last few days to tell you that I have been thinking about marriage."

Jane's heart almost stopped beating. It was coming. Scribner, the wary, the adept, the philanderer, was caught at last. She could hardly wait to hear how great was her victory.

"I am fastidious enough to demand harmony in those closest to me," he went on, with a shade of embarrassment in his voice. "I expect my wife to spend my money as gracefully as she can in maintaining the position I offer her. As long as she is true to me, she may gratify her tastes and whims at her leisure. Are these very difficult conditions?"

"I think not," answered Jane. "You are generous in setting no limitations to the tastes."

"I trust to her discretion."

"How do you define discretion?"

"A sense of the proprieties, and abstinence from erratic actions that cause too much public comment."

"More frankly, such actions as mine, which

have from time to time aroused your conventional disapproval. For instance, you consider amateur theatricals a little undignified?"

"Not necessarily for the younger girls; for my wife, yes."

Now it was Jane who was shocked — not so much at his narrowness as at her one-time willingness to give up her liberty for him. She thought of Ludwig Darenbeck's passionate declaration of his faith in his art, and plunged her hot hands into the water once more.

Walter leaned closer to her, and the canoe dipped.

"You will marry me, Jane?"

She answered slowly and gently, every word weighted with finality.

"I am sorry — but no, I cannot."

"What? Why not?" He had so expected acceptance, his question rang out sharply.

"I am going to be an actress."

"An actress — a common actress? You would n't degrade yourself to that!"

"I can't discuss it with you, Walter. We argue from such different standards. I am very, very sorry, but it is impossible."

"I should never have asked you if I had n't been practically certain of my answer. You can't deny that you have been leading me on."

"I have nothing to say in my defense, and I can't help what you think. I have changed my mind, that is all."

"Perhaps your fine musician has had a hand in this, after all," said Scribner, talking at random to hide his chagrin. The remark and his tone were too rough to ignore. All the happenings of the day had unnerved her; and Jane commanded him to take her home.

Walter laughed, trying equally to hide his hurt conceit and to impress Jane with the idea that he had merely postponed his intention of conquest. But he took up his paddle and presently, in silence, beached the canoe by the Fairview pier.

Mrs. Lathrop Van Mueller, sitting alone on the veranda at Fairview, had astonishment strongly marked on her face when she saw them come up the path from the pier.

"Is the dance over at the Raymonds?"

"I don't know," Jane replied, trying to appear unconcerned. "It was very hot in the ballroom, so Walter offered to take me on the lake. I told Margaret we were going and would meet them here when they returned; I was too tired to dance."

Mrs. Van Mueller had an aristocratic way of raising her eyebrows, and she raised them pointedly now.

"Indeed! Mr. Scribner, may I trouble you to find my shawl? I believe I left it in the dining-room after dinner, but if it is not there my maid will give it to you. It is growing chilly."

"At your service," said Walter courteously.

He was scarcely out of earshot when Mrs. Van Mueller laid her ringless hand on Jane's

bare arm. She never wore jewels except on state occasions, preferring, since every one knew she possessed them, to make them conspicuous by their absence. The suspicion of a smile flickered about her thin lips as she asked:

"Have you accepted him?"

"No; and I have no intention of doing so," was all Jane could answer without becoming hysterical.

"You have no intention—" Mrs. Van Mueller drew away her hand and her voice grew cold. "My dear young lady, do you realize your breech of etiquette in leaving a ballroom to engage a man in a tête-à-tête on the lake if you wish no importance attached to your actions? You were decidedly indiscreet. I am not accustomed to having my daughter's friends lay themselves open to uncomplimentary discussion."

"I didn't think of that; I was only glad to have an opportunity of leaving the room.

The heat had given me a headache. I saw no wrong in leaving."

"Oh, no; not that, my dear," — she said the "dear" very delicately — "but I do not approve of your unconventionality. It would have been quite a different matter if you had accepted him. You are very unwise to refuse him, Jane. His money and position would mean a great deal to you in the future."

"I am not seeking to marry money, Mrs. Van Mueller."

"Take my advice; you had better do so before you get too deeply entangled with your charming musician!" The tone was biting.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, my dear girl, that your attitude towards our poor violin strummer has been most decidedly indiscreet. I shall also take this opportunity to ask that you do not exchange any further words with him beyond the mere civilities of convention. You need not interrupt me. You will doubtless call him an artist.

I tell you that he has a wife and three little ones to support, and I would remind you of the fact that you are my daughter's friend. Your parents will thank me for the interest I am taking in your future. You are a very foolish girl to reject Walter Scribner. As to the musician, I shall pay him to-morrow for his services and tell him that I no longer need him."

"There is no need of your doing that, Mrs. Van Mueller," cried Jane, her voice shaking. "I should very much dislike to cause the starvation of the 'wife and three little ones.' So I shall thank you now for your hospitality and the honor done me by your invitation and say that I shall have to leave on the ten o'clock train to-morrow morning."

With regal scorn expressed in every line of her body, Mrs. Van Mueller rose from her chair. "Very well, Miss Carrington, I bid you good night."

Jane, left alone on the veranda, welcomed

the cool night breeze that fanned her burning cheeks. She was leaning against one of the colonial pillars and facing the garden when the tall figure of Darenbeck loomed up in the path.

"So," he said cheerily, as he perceived Jane, "alone out here — how does that come?"

The voice held frank equality, frank friendliness. That she was rich and he was poor made no difference now to Darenbeck; that she was of the inner circle and he, at present, only a sort of superior servant mattered not a whit. He and she met on the level of plain human beings, a level on which he, as the stronger artist, held the advantage; and he spoke to her as he might to a daughter.

"I was thinking," replied Jane. "Tell me where you have been."

"Every one was at the ball and I was not needed, so I made a pleasure-walk in the woods. It is still there at night, and yet is not still. I have made me a harmony of what I heard —

in minor; ach! soft, little light voices embroidered on the darkness of the night. To-morrow I play it for you on my violin."

"I am going away to-morrow and you won't see me again for a long time."

"Wirklich? You go away? Your sister, too?"

"No, she will stay. I received word to come home. I am wanted there."

"So! The father and mother — nicht wahr?"

The door opened and Scribner, smoking a cigarette, sauntered out of the house and advanced towards them without hesitation.

"Hope I am not de trop?" he remarked airily, but Jane did not reply.

"Rather cold out here, is n't it, Mr. Darenbeck?" he continued, apparently not noticing her silence. Jane stirred.

"Perhaps only you find it so," she said.

Scribner smiled quizzically and showed the scarf over his arm. "I see that Mrs. Van

Mueller vanished. Perhaps she decided it would be too chilly, even with this. And by the way, Mr. Darenbeck," he added, turning to the musician who had not spoken, " I believe she was asking for you a little while ago."

" Yes? " He turned to go.

" She has retired," put in Jane dryly, and Darenbeck reseated himself on the veranda-coping.

" It is rather late," agreed Walter pleasantly. " Rather late for you, too, is n't it, Mr. Darenbeck? I hear our merry party coming down the drive."

In truth there were sounds of laughter and song among the trees, and Jane recognized the strains of the objectionable " Mysterious Rag." Their voices seemed to strike the musician with something resembling terror, for he got himself out of sight without delay, booming unintelligible German.

He had scarcely moved two steps in the big

hall when Scribner bent down dangerously near Jane.

"May I put this shawl around your shoulders?"

He was between her and escape, and there was an unpleasant triumph in his voice. But the coping was low, and before he could move further Jane put a hand on the railing and vaulted it to the ground, leaving him standing with the shawl in his outstretched hands.

"Hi, there, Jane! What's the athletic event?" shouted Harry Summers, foremost of the party. "Why did you and Scribie go off in the middle of the dance? How'd you get home? Is there anything to eat on that veranda?"

"I don't know about the veranda," called back Jane, trying to make her voice sound natural, "but I'll race you all to the dining-room. I think there are sandwiches there."

With the word, Harry and three or four of the returning group set off with her in a

laughing scramble. The situation was saved and Scribner discreetly disappeared, cursing Jane's athletic propensities and his own bad luck.

When at last the midnight luncheon was eaten and the Carrington girls were alone in their rooms, Leslie could keep silent no longer.

"Oh, Jane, — did — did he?" she demanded.

"Yes, he did," admitted Jane.

Leslie stared at her, a trifle aggrieved at her brevity.

"Well, you don't look like a blushing bride. What are you so sober about? Aren't you glad you've accepted him?"

Jane did not reply for a moment but slowly continued to take out her hairpins, looking mechanically in the mirror. And then suddenly, unreasoningly, her control gave way, and before the astonished Leslie could realize what was happening she had tumbled herself down among the dainty toilet accessories and, hiding her face in her arms, burst into the fit

of nervous tears she had pent up for the last two hours.

"I have n't accepted him," she sobbed indignantly; "I have n't accepted him. I 've refused him, and I 'm glad of it — I 'm glad, I 'm glad. I 'll never marry him as long as I live, I don't care what anybody says, and for mercy's sake don't talk to me about it now, for I can't stand another featherweight!"

Leslie's pretty mouth dropped open and her round eyes grew even rounder with amazement. Jane — refuse Scribner! Jane — deliberately wreck the work of the whole season! Jane — put her head down on the dressing-table and cry like an hysterical boarding-school girl! It was unbelievable.

"Why, Jane!" she said weakly. "Why, Jane! How could you?"

Jane lifted her head and faced Leslie. She was ready at that moment to defy the whole family and anybody else that ventured to cross her path.

"What difference does it make to you?" she demanded, and Leslie shrank back.

"Oh, Janie, don't look at me like that," she quavered. "Only mother was so anxious for it to happen and she 'll be so disappointed, and — and — I gave him up to you, anyway. Please don't look at me like that."

"You gave him up to me? What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how interested he was in me last winter, and I had an awfully good time with him. But I 'm not so clever as you, and I knew mamma wanted you to marry him, so I — I — I just gave him up for — for the good of the family."

Leslie was crying now, her pretty head buried among the fluffy rose cushions of the big chair, and Jane was suddenly smitten by the sight. Leslie, at least, was not against her, and it was not fair to wreak her wrath on her little sister. She mopped her eyes impatiently and went over to take Leslie in her

arms. The little girl cuddled her head instantly into the hollow of Jane's shoulder and clung like a burr.

"There, there, dearie," said Jane comfortingly. "I was wrong and I 'm sorry. Don't cry so, honey — please don't. You can marry Scribner, now I 'm out of the field, if you want to. Truly I 'm sorry, dear."

Leslie emerged from her seclusion with a little gulp and put up her mouth in token of forgiveness.

"But, Jane," she said, "what are you going to do now? You are n't going to be an old maid, are you? Are n't you ever going to fall in love with anybody?"

"Can you keep a secret if I tell you?" asked Jane, pushing back Leslie's tumbled curls.

"Can I? I 'll never tell a soul."

"Well, then, this winter I 'm going on the stage."

"Oh!" gasped Leslie helplessly. "Oh!"

CHAPTER IV

Mrs. Carrington was lunching alone, in state. The Carrington house was the sort that the word "mansion" suited — dark, ugly, expensive, with an air of weight and solidity and the stamp of the early nineties in its stone turret and coping. Half a mile inland the crowded tenements west of North Clark Street reeked to heaven of dirt and drink, and the half-clad babies panted on back porches, but here the long sweep of the Drive spread out in cool greenness, and through gaps in the vine-screened piazza the dazzling blue of the lake, laced with white-caps and dashed with silver sails, could be seen by the queenly lady when she cared to raise her eyes.

But Mrs. Carrington was as unconcerned with the lake as she was with the dirty babies. Had any one called her attention to it in any

of its aspects as playground, picture, battlefield or highway of the merchant-marine, she would have given it a polite glance, said "Ah, yes, very interesting," and instantly returned to the serious business of life. Just now a neatly typewritten list of names propped up against a brass bowl of nasturtiums occupied her entire consideration, and she calculated the pros and cons of each one with the serious face of a general planning a coup. When she looked up, at the sound of a footstep, and found Jane coming up the cool vista of the lawn, she nearly upset her glass of iced tea in her surprise.

"My dear!" she said, "why in the world did you come home?"

Jane came over to the table, watching the butler out of the corner of her eye, and sank down in a wicker chair.

"Oh, it was getting too warm at Fairview," she said carelessly. "May I have some bouillon — I 'm desperately hungry."

"André, serve Miss Carrington," commanded the elder woman, and then returned to Jane.

"It has been quite comfortable here," she pursued. "I am planning a house-party at our farm in August. What do you think of this list?"

Jane picked it up, and the first name that caught her eye was that of Walter Scribner at the head of the men's list. The sight of it made her impatient, but she continued to look at the paper until the butler had left the room. Then, leaning her arm upon the table, she looked hard at the nasturtiums before her and said slowly:

"I 'd rather not have Walter Scribner."

"Has he—" Mrs. Carrington began eagerly.

"Yes. Last night. That is why I came home."

"He actually proposed to you? Oh, my dear, how happy I am!"

"Please wait. I refused him."

"Refused!" Mrs. Carrington stared at her daughter for a moment and then rose to her feet in uncontrollable vexation. "You mean to tell me that you have actually refused Walter Scribner? What are you thinking of?"

Jane sat silent, a stubborn expression on her face, and Mrs. Carrington, laying aside her dignity, walked impatiently up and down the rug.

"Jane, you are a fool!" she burst out. "I have permitted you to have your own way too often, overlooked your escapades because they gave you a certain popularity, let you fool with art and music and such stuff altogether too much, when you needed to be spanked with a slipper and taught the rudiments of common sense. Now this is the last straw. You must marry Walter Scribner, if you have to go on your knees to him and ask him to do it."

Jane leaned back in her chair with a sigh.

Once this tempest had spent itself, her mother would be more tractable. She disliked scenes. After a few minutes of tirade, Mrs. Carrington weakly sank into a chair and began to cry into a dainty handkerchief.

"There never was such an undutiful daughter," she sobbed. "I don't see what use it is to bring children into the world to have them defy you. I've planned all your life on your making a good match and being a credit to the family and you've simply thrown away all your chances. You aren't a débutante any longer, and before you know it you'll be passée. Oh, dear! It would be a great deal more pleasure never to have had a daughter!"

Her grief touched Jane. After all, it was hard to have one's ambition disappointed so keenly. She went over and put her hand on her mother's shoulder.

"I'm not willfully trying to thwart you, mother," she said gently. "I'm sorry you take it so hard, but I can't help it. I've been

trying to persuade myself all winter that I could marry Walter Scribner, but when it comes to the point I simply can't endure the thought of it. You have the satisfaction of knowing that he asked me, at any rate — is n't that something? Leslie will be more of a comfort to you than I ever could be; she 'll marry successfully and be the society leader of the family; but I — must go on the stage. I 'm made that way, mother, and I can't marry for an establishment and be happy."

Mrs. Carrington drew frigidly away from Jane's unaccustomed caress.

"You are overwrought," she said. "They have been wearing you out at Fairview, and it is quite time that you came home for a rest. And may I ask how you managed to come away from Mrs. Van Mueller's without exciting comment?"

"I said you had telegraphed for me, but it was n't entirely on account of Walter that I came away. Mrs. Van Mueller was displeased

with me for talking to a musician they had there. She threatened to dismiss him, and I told her I would save her that trouble by going away myself."

Mrs. Carrington raised her eyebrows in further displeasure and regarded Jane sternly.

"You will write a letter of apology at once."

"I can't do that, mother."

"Did you hear what I said, Jane?"

"Yes, but I was morally right in doing as I did. I was not willing to have a poor man's earnings sacrificed on my account. Mrs. Van Mueller and I are no longer friends."

"She will send Leslie home."

"Oh, no. Leslie is sufficiently conventional to please her. It is an affair entirely between us two."

"She will blue-pencil you from her list."

"Probably; but I shall not be here to regret it. Next winter, if I am successful, will see me on the stage."

Mrs. Carrington made a gesture of complete exasperation.

"This is insufferable," she said curtly. "Go away — to your room — anywhere. I don't want to see you again to-day. You have displeased me beyond words, and I shall talk to your father this evening."

Mr. Carrington did not share his wife's vexation. With masculine indifference to trifles, he passed over the much-elaborated breach with Mrs. Van Mueller, and the unconventionality of Jane's behavior. Even her refusal of Scribner he did not take greatly to heart.

"Scribner is n't worth much," he commented shortly. "I 'd rather see her married to some man who had less millinery and more horse-sense — somebody like young Braddock of Braddock & Braddock. He can put over a deal as well as the old man, and he 'll be a big fellow one of these days. Why does n't he ever come to your parties?"

Jane did not give her mother time to reply, and that lady, having laid the situation before her husband, diplomatically withdrew. It was recognized in the Carrington household that only father could manage Jane.

"None of the men worth while ever spend time on our sort of society," she said, as Mrs. Carrington moved away. "They 're all either too tired at night, or else they don't like to waste time on such trivialities. If I knew some of the men you do, daddy, I might fall in love with one of them. But I have n't any patience with these perfect Apollos who walk around picking up handkerchiefs and handing teacups."

"You ought to have been a boy, Janie," said her father with a sort of gruff wistfulness. "Then it would have been Carrington & Carrington — what? I picked out the place where I 'd paint in that sign, years ago — on the west wall of the plant, facing the Northwestern tracks."

Jane perched herself on the arm of her father's chair and rumpled his thick white hair affectionately. She had always had much more in common with the straight-shouldered, silent, successful man than with her mother.

She never frivoled or posed with her father, and as far back as she could remember had never disobeyed him. Even in her sailor-suit days they had been chums, and many were the times they had eluded Mrs. Carrington's watchful eyes to go on hilarious excursions in his own buggy that even now Mr. Carrington would not displace by an automobile. Jane knew the Carrington Plow Works from boiler-room to roof, as neither Mrs. Carrington nor Leslie knew them; and understood her father as he understood her. So there was no need for subterfuge between them, and once Mrs. Carrington was out of the room, Jane dropped into direct talk and ceased to stick out hostile quills.

"I wish I had," she said soberly. "We 'd

have run the Carrington plows straight through America. It 's no use talking, daddy, I 've got the business microbe in my blood, and that 's why I want to go on the stage. It 's the only business I 'm fitted for, and I know I could make good in it."

Mr. Carrington moved uneasily.

" You 'd better forget about that," he remonstrated. " I can't have you doing anything of that sort. If it were plows, and you were a man, it would be a different matter. But the stage is n't — why, daughter, it is n't respectable; it 's a business no good woman should be in. You must consider the family's feelings, your mother's opinion, Leslie's future."

" I know it," said Jane soberly. " That has kept me back for years, and made me spend myself on something that I knew was superficial and worthless. Oh, if I could only accomplish something worth while! I wish I 'd been born poor. I 'd have had to work for

my living then and you 'd have let me go on the stage, as I wanted to do. Please, daddy, let me. You don't want me to be a miserable, sour, discontented old maid, do you? "

" I 'd rather have you that than a failure."

" But I won't fail — I know I won't. I 'm not afraid of the hard work and the all-night rehearsals and the bad accommodations and the struggling period. I can endure and work until I win. Anyway, even failure would be better than deliberately killing myself by inches, as I 'm doing here."

" That is extravagant talk. You would n't be killing yourself by inches if you stayed at home like a sensible girl and married some decent man as your mother wants you to do."

" I would, I would," insisted Jane. " I can't stand it any longer. If you love me, daddy, if you want me to be happy at all, you will take me to a manager and help me with your influence. You could make it so much easier for me than it will be if I have to make my

way alone. You know I love you and would do anything for you — won't you do this much for me? Dear daddy, I want it so!"

His world's opinion had come to mean more to him than he would admit, but for a moment he hesitated. Then, decisively, he unclasped Jane's arms from about his neck and stood up.

"No, Jane," he said with finality in his voice. "We 'll have no more of this talk. You cannot go on the stage, and that ends it. Never mention the subject again in my hearing."

Jane stood facing him, her cheeks burning, her eyes bright.

"Then I 'll go alone."

"And break our hearts?"

The conventional phrase sounded curiously on her father's lips. Jane had read it in novels and smiled over it; but spoken in that dry, choked tone, it rang unexpectedly true, unexpectedly moving. Mr. Carrington put his

hand on her shoulder and drew her close to him.

"My daughter," he said gently, "it is a solemn truth that I'd rather see you dead than on the stage. Can you not give up this preposterous notion for the sake of your mother and me?"

Jane felt something moist on her cheek — not her own tears, for she was dry-eyed. She swayed as if she had been physically struck; sick at heart, she hid her face on his shoulder.

"Yes, father," she said brokenly. "If you want it as much as that I'll — give it up."

. . . . . .

There was nothing left for her to do but turn to Scribner. One refusal had only put him on his mettle, and he systematically laid siege to Jane.

"You might as well give in," he said to her one bright afternoon as a party of them were having tea on the lawn. His remark seemed casual, but he looked at her very

steadily. Jane lowered her lashes and flushed, setting down her half-raised cup as if suddenly unable to swallow.

"I suppose I might," she said wearily, "I suppose I — Well, yes, then."

Scribner put his hand on hers — and then suddenly, without reason, there flashed into Jane's mind the picture of Bryce Gordon as he had talked with her on the night of the play. He had spoken of the inevitability of fate. She drew away her hand. If a strong man could bow to such a philosophy, what chance had such a slip of a girl as she to overcome it? Perhaps after all Darenbeck was only a sentimental dreamer, and perhaps Gordon, with all the rest of her older friends, was right. She glanced at Scribner, complacent in his white flannels, sipping his tea, and sighed. Presently, pleading a headache, she disappeared into the house. Scribner was too tactful to press himself on her, but he went away quite content with his victory. After

marriage it would be time enough to break Jane in.

During the period of their engagement Jane led Scribner a dance with all the figures that her inventive imagination could devise. Being engaged to a man of his stamp was not a sweetening tonic to the soul. Although he was suave enough not to forget himself, Jane's intuitions were too unerring to miss certain repulsive presentiments; and she shrank from him, parrying skillfully, evading, making her reserve appear to be preoccupation with the social obligations that followed the announcement of their engagement. She managed to keep him at a distance, never to see him alone, never for an instant to allow the mask of social politeness to drop from either of their faces. Walter wanted an autumn wedding, but Jane found excuse after excuse for delay, putting him off with vague replies. But when December came she had taxed her ingenuity to the utmost and was no longer careful of

her circumventions. Frankly and openly she was hard as nails, and more bizarre than ever.

Mrs. Van Mueller noted this new hardness and commented on it when she came to the Carrington Christmas ball. She had paid no attention to Jane since the unfortunate incident at her country home, although she had associated quite amicably with the rest of the Carrington family. As the months had slipped by without bringing any apology from Jane, Mrs. Van Mueller began to have some admiration for the girl who had the courage of her convictions and a pride that forbade her making concessions as payment for social patronage. She watched her now as she circled about the ballroom, sparkling, feverishly gay. Her gown, embroidered in gold, shimmered with every move she made, a diamond star nestled in her hair and a pearl necklace lay about her throat. She wore a cluster of American Beauties, their rich color reflecting a glowing

warmth to her cheeks, and her red lips curved with the insolence of recognized leadership.

"I think she has lost a great portion of her beauty," remarked Mrs. Van Mueller quietly to a woman who had just remarked upon Jane's gorgeous appearance.

"Do you really? I never used to think her good-looking at all, but she has so much dash, vivacity and recklessness now that I am as much fascinated as the men. They cannot keep away from her even though she is engaged. Look at Walter Scribner — poor fellow — he is positively on the very outside of the circle."

"She is extreme," said Mrs. Van Mueller curtly, as she walked away.

Walter had jealousy written in every line of his face as he made his way through the group and took Jane's gold fan from her.

"This dance is mine," he said.

"Is it?" she asked coolly of Harry, who stood nearest to her. "Harry is taking care

of my card for me. Does the dance belong to Mr. Scribner?"

Reassured that it did, she laughed a "farewell," picked up her train, exposed a pair of exquisite slippers and waltzed away on Scribner's arm.

"You need n't be such a bear about it," she said petulantly, under cover of the music, as he guided her in and out among the whirling couples.

"You forget that this is only the second dance I have had with you this evening."

"Well, what of it, mon cher fiancé?" she inquired. "Have n't you been able to select enough pretty girls to fill out your program? You can't expect me to bore myself with you every dance; the first and the last before midnight, that is the very least convention will permit me to give you. As long as I am within the pale, why do you complain?"

"I sent you orchids and you wear roses. Why?"

"Suit my complexion better."

"Who gave them to you?"

Her answer was frivolous.

Walter said something between his teeth.

"Did you see the long article and my picture in the paper this morning?" she asked finally.

"Yes."

"'Audacious and reckless rider,' was good, was n't it? Did n't it amuse you?"

"You will succeed some day in breaking your neck in your desperate rides. You are desperate in everything you do."

"Ah, perhaps I am. But, my dear, if you want to make me a present, bring me, instead of your orchids, — which are becoming very tiresome, — two jeweled rosettes for my horse."

"Where can I get them?"

"Have them made. It will give you something to think about for a few days, and it is time for me to create a new fashion; things are getting stupid. Even father is beginning

to disapprove of my extravagance — says every one is talking about my extraordinary ways of doing things. He says the wedding will have to be in keeping."

"By all means!" exclaimed Walter. "It 's got to be the biggest affair of next season."

"It certainly will be. I want them to say that no wedding was ever so big, so costly, so magnificent, and no bride so gorgeously gowned. I want the same thing said of my funeral."

"After the wedding we will take a trip to Europe and — "

She cut him off sharply. "I have n't time to think so far ahead; and, before I forget it, I expect you to escort me to the Coppet dinner to-morrow night, and from there to Julia's ball."

"I thought you said you had declined."

"I accept everything."

"You are never at home. I have not had a talk with you for weeks that has not been

caught on the wing while dancing or driving rapidly from one function to another. How can you stand it?"

"I love it!" she said with closed teeth.

"More than you do me?"

"More than I love you." She tore her fan from his hand. "Now stop, I've danced enough and I'm tired. Give me some punch."

Mrs. Van Mueller had made her way to Mrs. Carrington's side.

"Jane has changed a great deal," she said quietly. "I have not approved of the remarks people have been making about her recklessness, though she was very wise to accept Scribner."

"I must apologize again," murmured Mrs. Carrington sweetly, "for her rudeness this summer. I cannot make her speak to you about it."

"There is no need. I hope she is happy."

"Since her engagement she has changed for the better in everything."

"Do you call this better?" Mrs. Van Mueller asked, but Mrs. Carrington saw no significance in the remark.

"She has entirely forgotten her theatrical notions. The subject is no longer mentioned, and she is in her proper sphere at last."

"Undoubtedly."

Mrs. Van Mueller walked towards the group about the punch table. The young people parted like weeds before the wind to let her pass; but there was one who did not step aside, did not ever so slightly bend her head or flicker an eyelash. Jane Carrington's dark eyes were busy with the dresses of some women in the big ballroom; they did not notice anything in a nearer range until she actually heard herself addressed. Then a smile tugged at her lips.

"Miss Carrington, I would like to speak to you."

"Mrs. Van Mueller," said Jane.

The elder woman halted, as if the girl's at-

titude had frozen the words on her lips. She waited, toying with her lorgnette.

"Before the old year goes, Jane, I came to — tell you that — I like your spirit."

She waited. The smile died on Jane's lips.

"I thank you," she said with dignity.

"I also came to say that Margaret and I leave for Europe on the seventh, and that I shall be glad to have you accompany us, if your parents will permit. You can buy your trousseau in Paris. Will you go?"

Jane's eyes lighted up. She laughed almost hysterically.

"Will I go? With all my heart."

Mrs. Van Mueller turned, as if her effort to speak first had been a wrench; and Leslie, who had managed to catch the trend of the conversation without appearing to listen, hastened to Jane's side.

"That's bully of her," she whispered quickly. "You go along, Jane, and if there are any counts hanging around Margaret,

shove them off and make them fall in love with you."

"Shall I?" Jane's manner was a little wild. "I'm going in for breaking hearts. If I have a chance, maybe I'll marry a prince. Just watch me."

. . . . . .

The New Year was drawing very near when fate again took a hand on the chessboard and brought that unreckoned-on pawn, Ludwig Darenbeck, across Jane's path. He came to the Carrington mansion the day before Jane was to leave for her European trip, a big, shabby, uncouth figure, at which the maid looked askance when she left him to wait in the reception-room and carried his name to her mistress, where she was overseeing the packing of a wilderness of trunks.

Jane read the card, and went swiftly to meet him, memory tugging at her heart. He rose to greet her with hand outstretched, a roll of paper under one rough-clad arm.

"It is you, Fräulein!" he said warmly. "Ach, this does the heart good! I read in the paper that you sail for the Old Country, and I must see you before you go. So I come, and the maid she wonder if I go to steal the spoons!" He laughed with the frank amusement of a boy, still holding Jane's hands in his grip.

"I am delighted to see you again, Mr. Darenbeck," smiled Jane easily. "It has been a long time since we talked Schubert, has n't it? Won't you sit down?"

The musician dropped her hands, and some of the warmth faded from his face. Jane's society manner was not intentional, and she did not realize how different it was from her frank friendliness of the summer. So, perceiving his sudden embarrassment without understanding its cause, she rattled gayly along to fill the pause. She had passed from the beauty of the snow and the coldness of the day to an expatiation on the pleasure of skat-

ing when Darenbeck brought his fist down with a bang on the fragile table beside him.

"Gott im Himmel!" he thundered. "Was sollen alle diese Worte, Fräulein? What does life mean to you — what does man mean to you — what is art to you? You stand there, you say it is cold, when I am all hot here" — and he beat his hand against his chest. "Here in my hands I bring before you my symphony, my greatest music, my masterpiece. Three, five years ago I begin her in the Fatherland — I come to this America — I cannot write her. I make only things to shut one's ears. I lay her aside, I say it is no use. Then I see you — you bring back the Schaffensdrang. In the woods I find my theme when I am thinking of you — I play it on my violin — I hear the horns answering, the wood-winds making the little voices of the night, the big drum go bum! — so! I leave that Fairview. I get my pencil and paper and I write, write, write. For six months I write. I make the

great symphony. I make it so that people shall hear it, and laugh and cry and think of their youth and die erste Liebe and the place where they were geboren. And then I bring it to you — finished — complete — ready for the Herr Direktor to lift his stick, and the first violin to breathe out the first note — ach, such a note! — and — mein Gott, Fraülein, you tell me that the day is cold!"

The distress of the big man was too real to be doubted. Jane was upset by the vehemence of his attack, and suddenly she felt that it was deserved. She told herself that the game she had been playing was a worthless game; that she had yielded to false gods, had failed to be the woman he had thought her, and she put her hands up to her face, ashamed. Herr Darenbeck jumped from his chair and tramped two or three times up and down the room. Then he stopped before her.

"I ask of you pardon, gnädiges Fraülein,"

he said gently. "Tell me, then, what has happened."

Jane caught her breath sharply and steadied herself.

"You are right, Herr Darenbeck," she answered. "I — I 've been trying to forget what I ought most to remember. But I have n't forgotten as much as you think. What you said to me in the woods last summer will stay with me as long as I live; and" — she held out her hand to him as she spoke — "in all sincerity, I 'm going to try to carry it out. Let me see your symphony — will you?"

The German looked into her eyes keenly.

"You mean that — yes? Then — see!" And with the gesture of a mother laying her child in other hands he placed before Jane the thick bundle of manuscript music, written boldly, with a sureness of touch, a big spaciousness even in the broad pen-strokes, the ties that bound note to note. It was utterly beyond Jane's dilettante knowledge of music, but

the very touch of the manuscript thrilled her with a sense of his achievement and made her eyes shine.

"See," he said again, turning a leaf. "There is your name on the title-page. This symphony will live after you and I have gone to sleep, and never will it be played to move men and women without a part of you being in it. No, not one man shall think of his home valley, not one woman shall think of her child lying sleeping in the cradle, without its being you who helped to make it so. Is not that something?"

"I can never thank you," whispered Jane, moved to her depths.

"Ach, but you can," he declared. "You can be yourself — always. You can forget to talk about the cold day and how you made the name on the ice. You can go out and learn to do the big things. That will be my reward."

From that moment Jane's decision was settled. She never knew how she got through

the farewells at home; but somehow the trunks at last were all packed, the good-bys said, the flowers piled in their drawing-room on the Limited, and Jane, on the observation platform, was waving good-by to a group of friends seen through a mist of tears. Mrs. Van Mueller and Margaret, feeling chilled by the winter air, went in as soon as the station dropped out of sight behind the warehouses, and Jane sat alone in the smoky dusk, thinking more soberly than she had ever done in her life.

There was both good and bad in Jane Carrington's desire to go on the stage. All her life she had hungered for admiration, and been feverishly eager for the center of the spotlight. It was vanity that had moved her social eccentricities and won her the name of the erratic Miss Carrington, vanity that had swept her along when her friends praised her acting, vanity that had made her yearn for a larger audience and a louder applause. That vanity, though she would not have admitted

it, still moved her strongly. But mingled with it was something greater and far more sincere, — the desire of every human being to justify its existence, to strive, to succeed in doing some one thing well.

This was what she had tried to express when she talked with her father; what, if she had been the boy he had hoped, would have made her his able lieutenant; and what had made him waver for an instant when she had pleaded for a chance to prove her ability. But he had feared for her safety, as any father might well fear for the safety of his daughter in such a life as she contemplated; and, moved partly by that fear and partly by the known opinion of his world, he had refused.

Jane loved her father, but her vanity was stronger than her love. She thought of him now, and sighed — poor daddy, it would hurt him terribly. Then she began to plan, and in planning forgot all else until the brakeman's coming to place the tail-lights startled

her into a realization that she was very cold and cramped. They must be waiting for her in the diner. She threw a kiss back through the darkness to a gray-haired man in Chicago from whom she was drawing farther away with every mile, and went in, her course fully determined in her own mind.

. . . . . .

The morning they intended to sail, Mrs. Van Mueller and Margaret were sipping breakfast coffee in bed at the hotel in New York when Jane entered, dressed for the street.

"Of all things!" exclaimed Margaret. "What's the matter with you? Dressed for the boat already?"

Mrs. Van Mueller echoed her daughter's surprise.

Jane was buttoning her gloves briskly. "One of my friends telephoned me she would never forgive me if I did not run in to see her this morning, and as I am extremely fond

of her, I promised. I 'll check my trunks and meet you on the boat. It 's nine now."

"How will you get to Hoboken?"

"Oh, I 'll drive." She tossed her lynx furs over her shoulders with an assurance that left no doubt as to her self-reliance.

Mrs. Van Mueller felt a trifle awed at her energy.

"Just as you please, my dear, of course. I admire your spirit, after being up so late. Had n't you better return to the hotel and meet us here?"

Jane nervously pulled down her veil.

"Mary's brother will see me to the boat."

"Very well; very well. But remember, eleven o'clock! and don't miss us."

"Oh, no," Jane laughed; "only don't wait for me on the dock; it is safer if we meet on board. Good-by — till then!"

"Good-by!"

And Jane fled to a cab, which carried her to the dock where lay the steamship on which

their passage had been engaged. There she gave a letter to an official, with instructions that it be given to Mrs. Van Mueller as soon as she arrived. The letter was a full explanation of the plans she had made, and the circumstances that had led up to them. It entreated a thousand pardons for this terrible use of Mrs. Van Mueller's friendship, to which she now owed everything. The letter once out of her fingers, Jane gave a sigh of relief; but the relief was followed soon by panic. She hurried into the cab in terror.

"Where to, ma'am?"

"Harlem."

It was the first distant place she could think of. The driver was surprised, but started off. He drove for an hour . . . two . . . before she came to the true realization of her position. When she did, she felt she must cry out to be taken back. As she raised her hand to knock at the window something seemed to draw it down. Again she tried, but could

not bring herself to attract the coachman's attention.

"I must go back!" she cried aloud, hoping he might hear, but the noise of the passing wagons and the jangling of the street cars drowned her voice. "I will go back!" She drew herself together, and, putting her hand upon the door, was about to open it when a truck towered close to the wheel. She put out her other hand to open the opposite door just as a car ran alongside of it. She sank back again, trembling.

"I am alone — alone — alone!" As the utter desolation of the word swept over her, she was seized with a frenzy of desire to return.

"Driver!"

She beat her hands against the glass, and her cry rang out shrilly above the noise of the city. "Drive me back to the dock; I must make that boat; it sails at eleven."

As the coachman drew up his horse and

turned to hear her orders, the noonday whistles shrieked above the grating and grinding of the heavy teams upon the cobble pavement.

"Drive on," she said, wishing she could crawl into a dark corner somewhere and die. Then she laughed at the absurdity of her weakness, and out of her despair there came slowly a sense of relief — an ecstacy of joy at the realization of her freedom. "Alone, yes; but free!"

It made no difference that the small room she had reserved for herself at the hotel overlooked a court, and that the furniture was of oak and the wall paper light-brown, with flowers that made one think of crawling spiders. Yes, she laughed with ironic humor as two porters struggled to crowd five trunks into the small room — trunks filled to overflowing with an array of garments intended to make conquests of foreign nobility, but doomed to lie hidden or to be used on the stage.

Now that indecision was over, the final step taken and all bridges burned behind her, the novelty of the new situation revived in Jane her natural buoyancy — her almost boyish passion for adventure. In this spirit, and equipped for conquest in a navy blue suit of simple cut, a black hat placed at a sedate angle upon her head, the brilliancy of her complexion mellowed by a dark-blue veil, a cluster of purple violets nestling in her black lynx muff, Jane started forth next morning to win Broadway.

PART TWO

THE SLOUGH OF DESPOND

CHAPTER V

Theatrical agencies — there were so many of them! Jane had run her finger down the list in the telephone book and made a memorandum of the names she had heard of and which she believed were reliable. She would take a street car and go to Mrs. Moughton's first. She was not used to cars, and tried to resist breathing the noxious air. She shrank back to prevent contact with the crowd, but the conductor's dirty hands pushed her roughly forward with a "Step up there; step up!"

This direct allusion to her was so humiliating that Jane, pink with embarrassment, descended at the next corner and hailed a hansom to take her to the theater building in Broadway. Although the cabman charged a dollar, Jane, through a habit of tipping, which she considered necessary, added enough change

to send him off smiling. His appreciation reacted on her as a tonic for self-esteem. She stepped into the elevator with the feeling that she was still the well-born, well-bred, irresistible Jane Carrington.

A gentleman, recognizing in her the refinement of birth, took off his hat. The other men in the car only stared. Jane thought to leave them as her floor was reached, but they, too, were bound for the Moughton Agency. The name in black letters on ground glass glared at them awe-inspiringly. In the second that she hesitated, considering whether she should knock or open the door, one of the men gave the knob a sharp turn and strode in; the rest followed.

The room was fairly large and divided by a wooden fence with a gate. In the part near the window there were common writing desks, several typewriters, a few chairs, and piles of papers of mysterious kinds and sizes lying on the floor. Stenographers were monotonously

clicking at the machines, and several men were wandering about, aimlessly. They had a great deal of space to themselves, — too much, she thought, — while the space on the other side of the fence, where she stood, was crowded with men and women, the majority standing.

Wondering what everybody was waiting for, she made her way boldly to the railing, expecting to question one of the men on the other side. He came forward finally, as if to speak to her; but instead, to her dismay, called over her shoulder to some one behind her.

"Fredericks, that you?"

A man's voice, rich in tone, sounded in Jane's ear as she was pushed aside by a fat, perspiring man with a creasy double chin.

"Got anything for me?"

"Go down to the matinée at Daly's to-day, and after it, report here."

A pleasant smile broadened the fat man's face as he turned quickly to leave. Jane seized the opportunity.

"A part for me?" she asked, trying her best to be bold.

"Read the board," the man answered impatiently, jotting down something on a piece of paper and then turning his back.

Hurt pride rushed the blood to Jane's cheeks. She looked about hastily to see if the crowd about her was smiling at her ignorance, but found to her relief that it was interested in more personal things.

"The board is over there," said a gentle, sweet-voiced woman, pointing to a blackboard fastened against the only space of wall free from framed photographs of members of the "profession."

"Oh!" gasped Jane, as her eyes caught sight of the sign of "Wanted," and below it the kind of engagements to be filled. "That's — that's all they have to offer here?"

The woman looked at her puzzled. "Did you just get in?"

Although she was not quite sure that she had understood the question, Jane nodded.

"Who have you been out with?"

"I beg pardon?"

"Been out on the road?"

"No, I — I've never acted before — professionally. I'm beginning."

The woman's face cleared.

"Have you registered?"

"Where?"

"Registered —given your name — does the agency know you?"

"No; I don't know anything about that; it's awfully good of you — how do I do it?"

"Tell that man there what you want; it's hard to get anything just now. Two plays failed this week, and we're all back looking for something new. . . . Why, Nell, you old dear!"

As the actress caught sight of a friend, the conversation came to an abrupt end, and Jane was left to feel doubly lonesome as she saw the two join in an enthusiastic embrace. There was nothing else to do but approach the man she had been advised to address.

"Name?" he asked tersely.

"Cecelia South," answered Jane bravely.

"Last engagement?"

The words came so snappily, he seemed so sure that there had been a last engagement, that, feeling as if the ground were suddenly slipping from under her, Jane stammered something about not having played lately.

"Well, what have you done?"

"Er — emotional parts — and —"

"What companies?"

Jane's tongue grew dry. While she hesitated an actor strode up, exclaiming jovially:

"How do you do, Mr. Flecker, I came in to give you my new address."

The man at the desk, close to the railing,

looked up and seemed a bit puzzled; yet, as if trying to hide his failure to recognize the newcomer, hastened his pen to his note-book, pausing after he had written "Mr.," and saying persuasively: "Mister —— I can't recall — pardon me — Mister —— "

"Ben Sawyer — character."

"Ah, yes — ah, yes! Of course — one forgets — and the address? "

The actor spoke it confidently, smiled affably, and, giving a dapper swing to his cane, asked: "Anything doing for me just now? "

"Not to-day."

Jane was watching the actor closely.

"All right, then," he said. "I 'll come around to-morrow; don't forget me again — eh? Character, you know — eh? Good morning, good morning! "

He dashed out as he had come in, exhaling good cheer and a self-complacency that was thoroughly convincing.

"Queer, can't remember the chap," muttered

the man at the desk. "Can't remember him, but I guess he's made good. Now what were you saying, Miss — Miss — South?" But Jane had fled.

Rushing up to the railing at the next agency on her list she exclaimed: "I came to give you my new address."

"How do you do, Miss ——"

"Have you forgotten me — Cecelia South?"

"Ah — yes — Miss South, you're back?"

"Yes, I'm back. My address this time will be Hotel Devonshire. Anything for me in my line — ingénue — you remember?"

"Not to-day."

"Well, I'll be in again, and if anything should turn up — why — to me, eh? Good morning, good morning!"

As the door slammed behind her the man of the second agency tugged reflectively at a tuft of his hair.

"Confound my memory. I did n't know she was so good-looking."

When she came back the next day he smiled: "Sorry, nothing yet."

At the end of some weeks Jane's search for an engagement, so hopefully begun, became a desperate attempt to find a means of livelihood. She had returned her letter of credit to her father, begging his forgiveness for her deception. She had told him she was taking an assumed name and would never trouble him again. She had given no address, and had retained only enough money for her immediate use. She had not counted on so long a search for employment, and her financial condition was growing serious.

There was the price of her room to be considered, her meals, and the extra charge for serving them upstairs — it would be too embarrassing to sit alone in the main dining-room, she thought. She had taken cabs oftener than she had realized, and had bought violets every day to make her costume more effective. Then, too, her sympathies, so quickly

reached by human need, helped to drain her purse.

"Are n't you cold?" she asked a violet boy one day, noticing his raw wrists as he handled the bouquet she was purchasing.

"Froze," he replied with a shiver.

She could not resist giving him a dollar and disappearing before he could make the change. It cheered her to picture his astonishment and pleasure. She knew how much she, herself, would have valued the aid of a friend.

The realization of her situation chased hope out of her eyes; it drew puckers in her forehead, and took the joyful spring out of her walk. Her lips drooped wearily when not tightly pressed together in efforts to overcome, by self-assertion, her growing sensitiveness. She went to a cheaper hotel, walked to save carfare, and ate as little as she dared. It was hard to give up personal comfort and deny oneself; it was all the harder by contrast with the kind of a life that had gone before.

It seemed the depth of degradation to pawn one of her rings, and the ticket lying in her pocket burnt her with shame. Even when she slept there were dreams of detectives and police. One night, in fleeing from them in a dream, she ran for safety to her father's arms, and, awakened by her own cry that resounded in the room, put out her hands in the dark, only to find herself alone. Another night she dreamed she was a star, and taking curtain-calls in answer to deafening applause. She awoke to find the applause was sleet driving against the window.

The sleet continued all day, but she braved it, and made her way to the street car and a manager's office she had visited many times already. She came in, her veil frosted by her breath, her forehead fringed with damp curls, her furs wet and stringy, and slush thick on her boots.

"Don't tell me you have nothing to-day," she pleaded, breathlessly sinking into a chair.

"I've got to find work. I've got to; you must give me something!"

"Beauty in distress! That ain't a bad property pose."

Jane's eyes flashed, but she had learned that the resentment of such discourtesies did no good. So she said nothing, and the manager, mollified by his exhibition of acumen, went on:

"You wait until I read my mail, and then I'll let you know."

He turned to his desk with an air of ending the conversation, and Jane, going over to the dingy window, stared out at the rain-swept street, trying to choke down a lump in her throat. A poor girl, draggled and hopeless, passed close to the window. Jane noticed her broken shoes and wondered how it would be if she were to exchange places with her. Which was the worst kind of misery — to know the lack of what one had had or to long for the unexperienced?

"You can have this part if you want it.

I was going to give it to Sybilline Mann, but she ain't here yet, and you 'll do just as well."

The manager pushed a slim little blue booklet to the edge of the desk, and Jane, once more aglow with hope, recrossed the room.

"It 's fifteen a week, and we leave town Sunday to try it on the road. Ain't no place for it on Broadway yet. Call for rehearsal at ten."

She did not reply, for she could not bring herself to speak. She went away and, having no other place to go until the time for rehearsal, directed her steps to the stage door.

The doorman growled as a gust of rain swept in with her.

"I 've come for rehearsal," she said timidly, in answer to a scrutinizing frown. He accepted her explanation without response, and she was left to find her way along the narrow corridor that led finally to a shaky wooden staircase and the stage above, where the light of dismal day, filtering through one window

in the rear, was scarcely enough to outline pieces of scenery leaning against the wall and various properties scattered here and there. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, the spiderwebs grew in size and the scenery loomed up in all its exaggerated hideousness. Beyond the proscenium the black auditorium looked as if shrouded in death.

The utter desolation of the place, bereft of all scintillating sham, intensified the ache of Jane's much bruised spirit. She tried to shake off her growing despondency by walking up and down the stage reciting the lines of her part, but her footsteps re-echoed hollowly over the trap doors, and invisible spirits of the place seemed to taunt her novitiate. She imagined the shades of Siddons and Booth laughing derisively at her conceit as she shrank upon a dusty chair, shivering with the cold that penetrated even through her furs, and trembling with the recently acquired realization of her incompetence. A gray mouse, nibbling peace-

fully at the stalk of a tissue-paper rosebush, and the doorman, falling asleep in his glass cage, seemed to be the only other living beings in the house.

Towards ten o'clock the members of the company began to troop in, scarcely noticing her in their indifference to all which did not concern themselves. Formerly this unconcern would have stung her to the quick, accustomed as she was to attention; now it was with a sense of relief that she gave up the center of the stage to those who considered it their due.

In the gray light of the damp atmosphere the faces of the women looked uncannily pale and drawn, and those of the men of the company unpleasantly sallow. The cold that made them hug themselves in their coats and pull up their collars did not help to assuage their ill-temper, aroused by the delay of the manager in coming to conduct the rehearsal. The men paced the stage impatiently, cursing the rule that forbade smoking, while the women

tried to warm the atmosphere with unpleasant little spurts of gossip. One of them, in holding her wet skirt away from her feet, displayed a pair of low brown shoes begrimed with mud and a brown stocking much in need of darning. Her hair was bleached, and Jane shrank within herself in disgust. Her gesture aroused the curiosity of the woman.

"Hello! What's your turn?" she bawled out cordially.

"I beg pardon?" murmured Jane shrinkingly, but her answer was greeted with chuckles of amusement. The men stopped walking to listen to the conversation, and the women swung around in their chairs to face her.

"You're green in the business, ain't you?" exclaimed the heavy lady; but though her words sounded rude, her voice was not unkind. "I remember how old Daly tuk me in when I was a kid and was to make me a leadin' lady, only I tuk sick and then Ada Rehan got the job, but I could have —"

"Say, that 'll do for you, Cheshire," cut in the blondine. "We 've heard that stuff before; you ain't got nothing left for your hits but your Cheshire smile."

"That 's more 'n you got," was the angry retort. "I was married when I was half your age."

The blondine flushed. "Perhaps it ain't for lack of chances."

Derisive laughter followed this remark and a combat of words, in the heat of which Jane was forgotten by the women. One of the men, with elaborate courtesy, begged to introduce himself as Harold Forrest, the leading man of the production. Jane replied that she was Cecelia South, intrusted with the part of the maid, but that she hoped for a better opportunity.

"Deuced hard luck!" murmured Mr. Forrest, in a voice delicately modulated with sympathy, as he drew up a chair and sat down beside her. "My part is very bad, too. I

was to be starred this yeah, but at the last moment we could n't get the American rights. Of course, if this is a success I might be induced to play it for a season. You see Caroline Mills is waning in popularity — bad vehicles for two yeahs running — and is afraid to face Broadway a third time without a trial on the road. So we 're out for the number-two towns to St. Louis, this trip."

"I have never been much impressed with Miss Mills' talent," ventured Jane, trying to suppress her growing aversion.

"Clevah, but not emotional. Hard as nails to play up to. Have you been on long?"

"No; that is, yes; two years — out west — in stock. This is my first trial in New York."

"Oh, we don't play New York, you know. We 're too afraid of a frost; it 's us for Albany next Monday. D' ye see —"

He was starting off on another harangue when he was interrupted by the blondine, who, to cut short a banter that was getting beyond

her inventive wit, directed the attention of her companions to them.

"Say, look at the lady-killer and the kid!"

Jane thereby received the professional baptism of the nickname "Kid," which clung to her as long as the company lived to call her so. Forrest received the comment with a tolerant smile, and Jane's embarrassment was covered by the noisy advent of the manager and the star, Caroline Mills.

"B-r-r-r-r, it's freezing!" cried the star petulantly. "No steam on here? I can see my breath. I don't want this kind of a frost."

A stage hand lighting the lamp on the prompt table growled something about seeing what he could do and disappeared in haste. The manager tightened the muffler about his neck and, rapping on the table, called for the opening scene. The actors sauntered to their places and the rehearsal began.

"Not do it!" said an actor, after some little time had elapsed.

"Not do it!" he said, and looked about questioningly.

"Not do it!" shouted the manager. There was silence. "Whose cue is 'Not do it'?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, it's mine," exclaimed Jane, suddenly awakened to the fractional value of her part to the whole.

"Mind your business and don't keep the rehearsal all day. Enter D. F., address Larson."

Fortunately Jane had had enough amateur training to know the abbreviations used in stage manuscript, but she did not know which of the four people in the scene was the actor called Larson.

"Which is Mr. Larson?" she asked naturally enough, but the question sounded stupid and made the blondine titter.

The titter was the thing Jane needed. She threw back her head and defiance lighted her eyes, which before had been expressionless and dull. Harold Forrest wondered why he had not thought her pretty before, and the star

gave her a sharp look, the first she had deigned to bestow upon her.

"The kid's got a temper," whispered the blondine to Cheshire. "Good for her."

Jane felt intuitively that she was winning ground.

The rehearsal was long and dreary and when it was over the temper of all concerned had been much tried. As the company was straggling out, the blondine paused at Jane's side and half-timidly linked her arm in hers. Jane started in surprise, but shrank from hurting the girl by drawing away. Whereas bodily fatigue made the majority of the company maudlin, it seemed to make the blondine gentle. "Let's go out together and get some lunch," she said wistfully. "I'm awfully dry."

Jane wanted to refuse, but the morning had been such a battle — the last two weeks such a fight against loneliness — that she had n't the courage to scorn an offer of companionship. For answer she let herself be led to

a small restaurant not far away, where, in spite of the lateness of the hour, there was a strong odor of steak and fried onions. The place was not crowded, though the tablecloths showed that it had been, so the blondine had the choice of a table near the window that fronted the street.

"Please, not there!" said Jane in horror. "Everybody passing will see us."

"I want to see *them*," answered the blondine regretfully, but without dwelling upon her preference followed Jane to the back of the room. They sank into chairs without taking off their coats, as the heat only intensified their chilliness.

"Waiter, bring two whiskies," said the blondine, picking up the bill of fare as if in her exceeding hunger she would devour the list with her eyes. Jane did not remonstrate. She was cold and she wanted whiskey; she disliked the taste of it, but the effect would be good.

"How much money have you got in your kick?"

"What?" asked Jane.

"How much can you pay for your lunch?"

"Oh," said Jane, counting the change in her purse, "I have seventy-five cents."

"All right, bring us a steak and some coffee! Hot, and lots of it. Gee, I'm hungry; ain't you?"

Jane nodded. "I didn't eat much for breakfast."

"I didn't have none to-day. We had supper out last night. What's your name?"

"Cecelia South."

"Never heard of you before. I'm Kate Huntington, as you heard that fool of a manager call me. Say, wasn't he the limit this morning? This your first fling?"

"I've been on two years," said Jane steadily, but to her surprise Kate shook her head and reached across the table to pat her companion's hand. "No, you ain't, little girl," she said

gently. "It's your first fling, and you're nothing but a kid. What you doin' it for? Why didn't you stay at home with your folks? You had it good there; you'll find that out, quick."

In a moment the veneer of coarseness, one kind of self-protection, faded away, and Jane, looking at the woman before her, saw a face tragically lined by sorrow and blue eyes sweetened by many tears. Made reverent at the revelation, she answered softly: "I couldn't help it. I had to come. I wanted to act, and I can't go back now!"

"You wouldn't if I begged you to, if I told you you'd be sorry?"

"No!" The answer was final.

"Then God help you."

It was a dramatic moment. To two natures keenly sensitive to the dramatic, silence was the only fitting sequence. And yet that silence, broken finally by the waiter bringing the plates, had bridged the breach between idealism and

realism. In some vague way Jane understood that though she could never learn more of Kate Huntington than Kate desired to reveal of her own accord, herself was but an open page to one who had learned to know many a chapter in the book of life. How much or how little had been divined she could not gauge, but the thought of being understood, instead of annoying or frightening her, filled her with a sense of relief. She told as much of her present circumstances as she dared, and deluged the actress with questions concerning professional technicalities. Kate answered slangily, now and then interpolating a squib or a pun nauseatingly old to the " profession " but deliciously new to Jane.

After all the steak was not bad, and the coffee cheering, so when Kate ordered her back to her hotel for a good sleep, Jane went hopefully, almost happily, to dream she was playing with many golden butterflies.

CHAPTER VI

The kind of room one occupied was no longer so important as the regularity and quantity of one's meals.

"It's cheaper if we take a room together," suggested Kate when they were in the train bound for Albany, and Jane acquiesced.

On arrival at an actors' boarding-house, where most of the members of "The Sister's Revenge" company flocked, there was a scramble for rooms, out of which Kate finally issued triumphant, with the news that she and Jane could have a third-floor room, center front, for the three nights of their stay. The landlady had called the price "a special favor," but Kate called it a "snide game." The room contained a bed, two chairs, a washstand with chipped crockery, and three family portraits. From the window one could see a bit of the

Hudson hills in the distance, but the broken-glass pane mended with yellow butcher paper did not improve the view, and was small protection against the cold.

"It ain't so awful, Kid!" exclaimed Kate cheerily, as she saw her companion's lips tremble dangerously. "It 's fine for the health, this cold — makes you sleep well. Lor', you should have seen the pip we got in our lungs in Dakota. Golly, I can feel it yet, and me playing the countess in bare skin. Now you take off your duds and hop in, and you 'll see the sun shining in the morning."

Jane walked to the bed and, swallowing hard, felt of the bluish sheets with shrinking fingers.

"Are — are all places on the road like this?" she asked.

"It 's pot luck with all of them, I guess, 'cept when you 're a star, and can put up at the Waldorf."

Jane said nothing, but a shudder of irre-

pressible disgust ran through her, the cry of the body for long-accustomed comfort, the need of the spirit that shrank from everything coarse, the demand of refinement for culture and harmony, the craving for the beautiful! Like the painted blotchy scenery, at close range, the life of the stage seemed sordid. Jane reluctantly took off her furs.

Soon Kate announced that she was ready to try the bath-tub across the hall, and vanished in a cotton-crêpe kimona. When she returned, she found Jane looking very pretty in her scarlet dressing-gown, with her dark hair falling about her shoulders.

"I let the water run in the tub for you, honey, and stuck a sign on the door. You ain't got nothing for your own for long here, so hurry up before the hot water runs out. It's coming mighty slow."

Jane ran across the hall into a small room quite devoid of towels and soap, but crowded to its capacity with odd pieces of useless fur-

niture, as if all the superfluous articles of the household had been gathered there throughout a year's time.

She had her towel and toilet articles with her, of course, but as her foot daintily touched the grainy bottom of the tin tub she thought of her Roman tiled one at home and sighed.

On returning to the room, she found Kate putting her hair up in curl-papers for the night, and the "heavy lady," who had come up in her yellow kimona from the floor below, chatting on the bed.

"There are them vaudeville people next to me," she was saying. "You know — that Jim Tortonati and his wife who do the cycle turn. I don't expect to get any sleep; they 're always scrappin'. That 's the worst of a town like this, you can't be particular and go to a house that takes only 'legits'!" She broke off at the sight of Jane. "Hello, Kid, you look fresh as a rose. Hop right in and don't catch cold," and she drew back the covers of the bed in

a motherly fashion. Jane, only too glad to escape the chilliness of the room, crept in quickly, and as the heavy woman bent over her to tuck in the covers she impetuously kissed her on the forehead.

"I wish I had a daughter like you. I'd see you got to be a star. You ain't got a chance to show your make-up."

The unexpected tenderness of the voice touched a chord too sensitive to be unresponsive.

Hot tears sprang to Jane's eyes and she impulsively threw her arms about the woman's neck.

"There, there, honey, you just cry all you want to; it'll do you good," said the older woman gently. "You've been keeping too much of this in; you've got to learn to blow off steam like the rest of us. There, there! You're homesick now, but in a little while it won't be so bad. And when you're used to the limelight home can't keep you. There,

now, you just bawl all you want to. When spring comes round every year I can't hardly wait until the run 's up and I go home to my sister's; but I 'm not there longer 'n a month before I 'm hankering after the show business. Sometimes I hate it, but I can't leave it. It keeps calling me back every time I turn my face away. And if you 've made up your mind it 's the only thing you want, you 've got to stick, now you 're down, or you 'll never have another happy minute in your life. Ain't it so, Kate?"

Kate, with curl-papers tightly wound about her head, was massaging her face with cold cream. "I suppose 't is. Gosh, how I used to want a home for mother an' me an' the kid. I did n't come because I was crazy to, but because I was starving. I did n't care about the lights and the play and the clothes; I wanted bread for the family. And all the time I was dancing in the chorus I was wishing I could dance faster, or something, than

the other girls, just to make more money. It 's always been money, darn it all!"

She had stopped rubbing her face while lost in recollection of her earlier years, and then, suddenly realizing that she was going too deep into old wells, she applied herself vigorously to rubbing off the cream. But her remarks had set the other woman thinking.

"How long have you been in the business?"

"Oh, about fourteen years; went on when I was fifteen. S'pose I 'll be in till I die; but I 'd get off to-morrow if I could."

"You would n't stay off."

"Huh! Would n't I?"

"If you feel like that you 'd better get married."

"That 's my own business. I 'm waiting for a chance at the only one — see?"

"What did you get into 'legit' for?"

"'Legit'?" answered Kate; "'cause I got sick of kicking and grinning and flirting and being rubbered at for my face. You need n't

snicker. I *was* pretty; I was too pretty, and that 's why I came to ' legit,' so 's I could do character parts and get rid of the johnnies. And now if you 're a lady you 'll get out and let us go to bed. The kid 's dead tired."

The " heavy lady " was too accustomed to Kate's outspoken ways to take offense, unless she were in the mood for a quarrel, so she trotted off, calling good night from the stairway.

" Good night," bawled Kate as she closed the door, and, turning, she stood for a moment gazing tenderly at the girl lying face downward among the grimy pillows. Then she turned out the gas, and knelt a long while in the dark before getting into bed. When she did, Jane gave no sign that she was still awake. The theatrical profession in perspective from Lake Shore Drive and the actual fact of a lumpy bed in a cold and grimy room were two very different articles, and Jane was wondering whether, after all, it was worth while.

Rehearsal the next day was equally disheartening. The theater was cold, the road manager out of temper and more than usually profane. But Jane got through her small part well, had a good dinner and a brisk walk, and in good spirits returned to the theater to dress. Things were not so bad after all, she thought.

There was an atmosphere of excitement behind the scenes now. The lights were on, the orchestra was squeaking an overture, everybody was in a tremble of excitement over the success or failure of the piece. Jane looked into the mirror of her dressing-room and met a fresh, excited face on which there seemed no need of rouge or kohl. She was dressed long before it was time for her entrance, and, walking up and down the wings, reveled in the artificiality of the stage. The odor of her make-up, her costume, the very " distant country " back-drop, gave her a delicious thrill, and when at last her cue came she entered left light of step.

Kate was extravagant afterwards in her praise of Jane's success. Perhaps the clothes that she had so freely shared had something to do with the compliments; perhaps she was only anxious to encourage a beginner. But it sounded sweet to Jane's ears, and all the rest of the way to St. Louis Jane played up to the limit allowed by the lines of her inconsequential part. Cold rooms in second-class hotels were nothing now, though Jane still shrank from the dismal gray sheets. She was facing real audiences, playing a real part, drawing a real salary. Jane laughed as she thought of the salary. It would not have paid for her cabs a few months ago, but she hugged it now. At last she was really earning some money; she was of use enough in the world to be paid in actual business cash for her work.

But the rest of the company did not share her enthusiasm. The old hands squinted through the curtains at the houses, shook their heads and prophesied tie-passes back to New

York before long. In St. Louis the crash came. "The Sister's Revenge" ran there four nights to steadily diminishing business and then there was a notice of disbandment tacked to the bulletin-board, at which the company glanced gloomily and straggled out of the theater, wondering how they were to get home.

Caroline Mills and the manager, despondent and discouraged, left on the morning train, and gradually the rest of the company, having borrowed money from friends, or pulled it out of a reserve roll in the tops of their stockings, followed their star. Jane, Kate and May, the ingénue, were stranded, and, after holding a council of ways and means, Jane intrusted to Kate a diamond star, on which that resourceful young woman raised enough money to buy their tickets back to New York.

Jane insisted on a pullman, having no fondness for the orange-peel and crying babies of the day coach, and, although Kate and May

were a little awed by the extravagance, they readily consented. The porter glanced disparagingly at their shabby grips, took in Jane's air of tailor-made trimness with rising approval, and was galvanized into instant activity by the dollar which she heedlessly slipped into his hand.

"Seb'm, eight *an'* nine, ma'am; yes'm, right this way, ma'am," he nodded, and, picking up their luggage, he led the way into the car, Kate and May following, and Jane, who had paused to ask a question of the conductor, bringing up the rear.

As she walked along the narrow passage, a man suddenly opened the door of a compartment, and, almost bumping into her, stepped back with an excuse that ended in a grasp.

"Jane Carrington!"

It was Walter Scribner.

The sight of her sent the hot blood into his face with a rush. Jane's presence had always affected him curiously, and the suddenness of

this meeting, combined with his anger at her for her unexplained desertion of him, made his senses swim. Before she could make up her mind which way to turn, he grasped her firmly by the arms, and pushing her into his compartment locked the door behind them and put his back to it.

"Well, my lady!" he said.

He had acted on impulse, and now that he had her inside he was not sure what he intended to do with her. He had learned that she had left Mrs. Van Mueller to become an actress, and wondered cynically how Jane managed to live on the salary of a beginner. But he had no sure weapon. Perhaps she might betray herself.

Jane had wrenched her arm free from his grasp, drawing back to the farthest confines of the narrow space, her head high and her eyes defiant.

"Open that door!" she commanded. But he only smiled an unpleasant smile and waited,

glancing from the little tear in her veil to the slightly scuffed toes of her shoes. Fear seized her heart with a sickening grip. She was at bay, and this time there was no way out. She changed her tactics.

"Walter! This is not like you. Please open that door."

He did not move. His mind was at work now, and there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes. Suddenly she realized that she had been watching that glitter for years.

"Maybe you broke the engagement," he said with a curl of the lip, "but you did not end the bargain."

"There is no bargain."

"I think"—his jaws set—"that there is!"

"I returned your ring. I burned your letters. I knew very well you could exist without me." She looked at him, daring him to deny it. "You know that yourself."

"You see I have not found your successor."

She tried to laugh away his fierceness.

"You are posing, Walter, just posing. You know it."

"You have a bad streak in you somewhere, Jane," he retorted brutally.

She glanced over his shoulder at the door, tight shut behind him. "I suppose I must let you say that — Mr. Scribner."

"And more, too, Miss Carrington! You ran away from home — have lived alone. Where?" His insinuation now was unmistakable. "Nobody knows where."

Again Jane eyed the door at his back. She leaned against one of the seats to prevent herself from falling against him when the train gave a lurch. He was not blind to the fierce resistance of her attitude and it infuriated him, as it had always done. He moved towards her, his eyes alight. Jane made herself small in the farthest corner, but faced him. And then, mercifully, there was a knock on the door.

For an instant he hesitated, while Jane

prayed internally, and then he opened it an inch.

"What is it?" he asked gruffly.

Two conductors stood in the corridor.

"Tickets," said one.

"You, sir, and the lady?" said the other.

While Walter fumbled angrily in his pockets for his ticket, Jane walked out of the compartment without a look behind or a syllable of explanation.

Walter mumbled something to the effect that she was his stenographer, and that a woman in the car ahead had her ticket. The conductors, not too critical, accepted his explanation and passed on, leaving Scribner furious with himself for the way he had bungled the situation.

Jane made her way through the coaches until she found her companions, who had glimpsed her recognition by a "swell" with awe and had gone on, not wanting, as they expressed it, "to butt in." Now they were full of ques-

tions, and Jane, seeing no one else to whom she could turn for protection, told them briefly her history, and explained that under the circumstances she did not want to see much of Scribner. For very shame she did not describe the scene in the compartment, and, quite unintentionally, instead of inspiring the girls with any dread of her ex-fiancé, she made them eager to see him again, and decidedly awed by the fact that they had had a real "society girl" as a companion. The name of Carrington was one to conjure with, even here.

As for Jane, she was unnerved by the scene she had undergone, and dreaded lest Scribner should intrude himself upon her again. Yet when he did not seek her she was still more worried, wondering what his next move might be, and lay awake most of the night planning how she should meet possible emergencies.

Scribner sat up late in his compartment, in a turmoil of mind foreign to his cold temperament. He had made a mess of things, as

usual. Why the devil could n't he control himself before Jane Carrington? What had possessed him to yield to impulse and drag her into his compartment in that fashion? Why had he been such a fool as to drop the mask? He bit viciously on the end of his cigar. He had been the same sort of fool before. There was the night he had proposed marriage to her — he moved impatiently in the soft chair, remembering how she had left him standing with that foolish shawl outspread in his hands. All through their engagement she had made him look silly, and he had pressed on against his better judgment while the débutantes giggled. She had made him ridiculous before his world, and, when the broken engagement came out, although society would outwardly commiserate, none knew better than he how it would inwardly sneer. He, Scribner, to be caught by a pair of dark eyes and then thrown ignominiously over — it was intolerable. More than that, she set herself against him — gad!

how handsome she had looked when she had faced him in the compartment! She had made a fool of him all along the line; a boy of twenty could not have made a worse mess of this episode in the train than he had done. And yet, he told himself, he was more than a match for her if he could only stop this cursed foolishness and play the game with his brains.

"By gad, I will!" he said half aloud. "I 'll break her impudent spirit if I have to break her proud neck!" Throwing away his ragged cigar, he selected a fresh one and settled down to reflect, his yellow-gray eyes narrowing unpleasantly and one ugly tooth set on his lower lip.

There were other ways, he ruminated; there were other ways. An actress, eh? and down on her luck. Scribner knew the theatrical world well, especially the cruel, seamy side of it, and he flattered himself that he could show Jane a trick or two at her own game.

Jane on her knees was a picture on which he dwelt with appetite. He sat there smoking and thinking until after midnight, and went to bed determined to be especially nice to Jane in the morning.

So when the meeting which Jane dreaded finally came, it was much less unpleasant than she had feared. Scribner explained that he was going east, brought a peace-offering of such roses as Jane had not owned for months, asked her and her friends to luncheon, and skillfully engineered a *tête-à-tête* with Jane in a vacant section near-by. Kate and May were completely won by his manners, and Jane was so relieved by his change of front that she acquiesced in his apology for his hasty action of the day before, and thanked fortune that evidently no emergencies would need to be met after all.

Scribner, on his part, having made his first move and established reasonably amicable relations, guided the conversation easily from

remarks on the weather to the subject of her health and her home.

"Your father grieves deeply, Jane," he told her. "Leslie tells me he never speaks at home. Your mother is broken-hearted. Why not come back?"

She dissented.

"I have found my place," she said quietly. "The theater gives me the first real thing of my life. It is quite too late now to urge me to break away from it."

"But, Jane, you are disgracing them."

Again she dissented.

"We argue from different standards, as I have often told you. I do not think that honest work is half so much a disgrace as sponging on father for a living and frittering away my time on a painted lie of a life. But, speaking from the worldly point of view, I am not using their name, and so no social disgrace can attach to them. Everybody thinks that I am in Europe with Mrs. Van Mueller. She

never answered my letter, for of course I did n't deserve it; but she has been good enough not to tell."

"No; only a few people know — friends of the family. She has even explained to those who have met her party abroad that you are visiting your own friends."

"Has she indeed?" said Jane, her eyes filling with tears. Evidently she had misjudged Mrs. Van Mueller.

"She has been very considerate," said Walter. "Now, Jane, why don't you drop this idea of yours and come back? Everything could be just as if these few weeks never had happened. You could make your father and mother happy, and outside of a dozen friends, no one need ever know of your escapade."

He waited. Perhaps he could save his face, after all. If he could get Jane back and then throw her over there would be good points about that, too.

But Jane shook her head.

"It 's no use talking, Walter. I can't and won't. I 'm dreadfully sorry to hurt father and mother, but I can't help it. I 've just got to go on. Please don't urge me any more. You have n't told me if Leslie is well. How is she looking?"

Scribner shrugged his shoulders and whistled revenge number one away for good-and-all. Now — let her look out for herself. He would have no mercy.

"Leslie is looking very well," he answered smoothly. "She is growing prettier every day and is getting to be quite a belle. I met her at Mrs. Raymond's dance last week and she was six deep in men. None of the other girls compare with her."

Jane smiled proudly at that; Leslie evidently was doing justice to her training. The conversation turned to other things and Jane kept it well on the surface. All the way to New York Scribner went out of his way to be delightful, as he knew well how to be. Kate

and May were charmed by his courtesy to the point of adoration, and even Jane could find no fault. Yet somehow, remembering that ugly glitter in his eyes, she distrusted him, and in spite of his unexceptionable manners and unfailing thoughtfulness the feeling instinctively grew. He called a taxicab in New York and escorted them to their boarding-house, exacting several promises from Jane to dine with him. Jane accepted because there was no plausible reason for her to refuse. He never mentioned their broken engagement and no longer touched upon home topics. He acted as if he were content to have Jane on the stage, satisfied to be with her for the delight of her society alone, as if he were graciously accepting the inevitable. In fact, when Kate and May procured engagements in companies playing out of town, Jane was glad to look to Walter for companionship.

No one would give her an engagement; not an agency in the city could place her. Day

after day she went the rounds, meeting Scribner at dinner every night with the same answer on her lips. She had hope for a long time; in fact, Walter was beginning to despair of her ever losing it, when at last one night he saw the first signs of real unhappiness creeping into her eyes. The next day she was ill at ease; the next so desperately hungry at dinner that he suspected she had fasted too long; the next night it was the same, and her hands trembled.

"I can't try any longer; there 's not an engagement anywhere for me. I have gone to the offices so much that the men look at me queerly when I come in and whisper to each other. My very pride bars me now. I can't endure another 'Sorry' and the shrug that goes with it." Walter commiserated with her.

The next night there was anger in Jane's eyes, as well as despair.

"Have you had no offer at all?" asked

Walter carelessly, picking up the Waldorf menu to select the dinner.

"Only one. Musical comedy, which, of course, I refused."

"It was a good part though, was n't it?" said Walter, checking off oyster cocktails and soup for two.

"No." Jane frowned.

"Not good? I thought you told me Brothers & Lang offered you a place in the chorus with positive promotion to principal within a month."

"Yes," — Jane bit her lip, as if to avoid saying all she knew — "but I do not accept such offers when they are accompanied by guarantees of wealthy backing. I am not in for the musical comedy game in New York."

"I don't follow you," replied Walter, completing his order and handing it to the waiter.

Jane looked away as she repeated the substance of her remark.

"Brothers & Lang want me for musical

comedy. They have had some offer and they insist upon my coming. I have refused and refused, and to-day I learned that I have merely wasted my time these last two weeks going to other agencies. Brothers & Lang sent out word not to give Cecelia South an engagement. They think that by closing all doors to me they can force me into their show."

"And can't they?" asked Walter carelessly, as he buttered a piece of roll.

"No."

"What are you going to do?"

Jane looked hopelessly at the women and men at the tables about her, then out of the dark night window. "I don't know."

A gleam came into Walter's eyes. He toyed nervously with a piece of bread in his fingers.

"Why resist so good an offer in musical comedy? Why not accept?"

Jane sent him a quick keen look, feeling as if her heart had stopped.

"You — you — suggest — that I accept?"

Walter looked at her steadily this time, so steadily that it frightened her.

"Why not — if I am the backer?"

It took a full minute for Jane to put two and two together, but when she had done so she was very pale, and got up slowly, with the greatest dignity restraining her quivering fury. The stare of a hundred eyes in the Waldorf dining-room forbade anything save the most conventional behavior, but she gave Walter one look, aflame like living coals, and walked out — out of the warm room, away from the food she had not yet touched, out into the mosaic hall — to the big glass doors.

CHAPTER VII

The Waldorf is a cosmopolitan place. In the corridors, always, are crowds of men who come in from the street to consult time-tables, buy newspapers, do their telephoning, or take advantage of sundry attractive purchasing opportunities.

Since her arrival in New York, Jane had seen many of her friends from time to time, but had not let herself be recognized, the brim of her hat and a thick veil concealing her identity. But to-night, as she walked out of the dining-room alone, she forgot her veil and her need of disguise.

As she passed into a triangle of the revolving glass door to go out, she chanced to glance at the man in the next triangle coming in. Their eyes met and a puzzled look of recognition crept into both faces. Jane, terrified by

the thought of being recognized, hastily attempted to pull down her veil, missed her opportunity to get out of her triangle, and had to walk around again. The man, thinking she was coming back to speak to him, waited in the hall, but she passed and hurried into the open towards Broadway. Looking neither to right nor to left, she walked straight ahead, bravely through the dark portions of the streets, confidently through the glaring portions, and did not stop until she had reached the chipped stone stoop of her dilapidated boarding-house. When she dared to look around, there was only a peaceful citizen behind her, evidently about to pass the house without a glance in its direction. Greatly relieved, Jane walked into the gas-lit hall and felt her way up the old-fashioned winding stairs to her tiny room.

It was an ordinary, nondescript, plain back room, with necessary furniture, unsatisfactory light and unreliable heat. There was not even

a grate to suggest a pathetic lack of coal or the sadness of dying embers — instead, a dismal black register in the floor, whence a faint warmth sometimes oozed into the room. While sitting near it to thaw out, Jane had a talk with herself about "the life."

For the first time in her existence, she felt, she was face to face with that world which she had so long hungered to see, and the realization that it had no respect for her gave her a shock of surprise, chagrin and pain. She was hungry, without money, friendless, with the gates of her chosen field closed to her. What was she to do? Where should she turn?

She felt of her drabbled skirt to see if it was drying, and thought of her dainty room overlooking the lake. Should she go home? Yes, they would take her back. What then? Marry Scribner? Impossible! Take up the old life? Again, impossible! The theater had called for its own in her, and had claimed her heart, even though now it cast her off. Go to

wealthy New York friends for temporary assistance? Perhaps, — but would they give it? Would they not rather notify her family? Grant that they protected her temporarily, how about the future?

To be sure, there were trunks filled with beautiful gowns, but Jane Carrington could not sell a piece of clothing. Pawning jewels was different — queens had done that. Besides, if she got an engagement they might save her the expense of costumes. As to the musical comedy suggestion — she shuddered at the recollection of Walter Scribner's greedy eyes. Find some other work? She, Jane Carrington, behind a counter? Well, why not? Work is honest — and there is torture in hunger.

To be sure, there is always the last resource — a defective gas-jet, one pistol shot, an overdose of a drug, the river. She decided in favor of escaping gas. It was less sensational, more plausible. She must not give a theatric effect — that had been overdone. Gas would leave

people in doubt, and there is something artistic in doubt, although gas is really not very æsthetic. She wished she could think of some more æsthetic way. Starving was pathetic, but it was so painful. This thought reminded her that she was hungry. Stupid! Why could n't she have eaten all of the Waldorf roll before she had understood Scribner? Why had she nibbled so little of it in anticipating the delight of the dinner he had ordered?

How could society tolerate men like Scribner — and Brothers & Lang? How was it possible that men dared to establish such fiendish organizations? Could nothing be done? Could there be no reform? If she became a star, could she not be known for her wonderful character, could she not stand for the elevation of the stage and the triumph of the good and beautiful? Was it not a wonderful goal to strive for? Was it not an honor to be a martyr for it if need be? Was it not an ideal worth dying for?

At this point in her light-headed wanderings Jane fainted, and fell with a sharp cry. The noise and the chandeliers rattling downstairs brought Mrs. Kelly, the landlady, upon the scene. She was not a hard-hearted landlady, neither a story-book ogre, nor an angel in disguise, but just a plain, ordinary landlady, with her own rent to pay and her own bread to win. She had the lock broken when there was no answer to her knocking, and added the price of repairs to Miss South's already overdue bill. Miss South was given a cup of tea and some bread, and then was asked to pay or vacate. Miss South promised to pay the next day, thanked her rescuers, set a chair against the door which would not stay shut, and sat down once more face to face with her problem.

She felt that she did not have a friend in the world. In that colossal, teeming city she was alone, a being apart from humanity, an isolated atom of wretchedness. That gas was

really a good idea — why not? Jane's luminous eyes traveled to the sputtering blue flame. She even rose to go to it, and then stopped half-way, struck suddenly by the absurdity of her action.

Her dramatic sense, that peculiar power in her which could detach itself from her ordinary entity and, standing apart, could criticize her actions and make mental note of them for future use, saved her. Years ago, when a snake had glided between Jane and Leslie, that same sense had watched Leslie's expression while Jane had stepped back in fright. And now Jane, the artist, watched Jane, the woman, and laughed.

"You little fool," the artist said. "That is good stage business, but ridiculous in reality. Feeling sorry for yourself, are n't you? Poor dear thing, not a friend in the world! It 's really too bad about you, is n't it? Keep right on with your melancholy, my dear, pity yourself, weave just the sweetest sad story about

yourself alone in New York, terrible New York, with not a penny for food and the room rent due and every door in the city closed to you! Genius struggling under the weight of poverty — dreadful, is n't it? Keep up the pose, my dear; walk the streets in despair. Perhaps a painter will draw you in your artistic rags, perhaps an author will write a story about you — go on — keep it up — act the destitute heroine — let me, the actress in you, applaud your business."

"I was only a despairing girl," cried Jane, the woman.

The artist laughed again. "Very well! But because you can picture yourself the heroine in a tragedy are you incapable of making yourself a heroine in a comedy?"

"But how?" said Jane, the woman.

"Stupid!" retorted Jane, the artist. "Do you think you are the only one in New York? Is your egotism so great that you cannot realize that there are thousands like you, and even

worse off? Think of each one imagining he has a corner in wretchedness? Oh, it is funny! Go out, forget yourself, work at anything, think of other people. What? You said you had no friends? Laugh at yourself for that. Chicago and New York are both full of them. You won't go to them? Ah, that is another matter. Laugh at your pride, not at circumstance. No money? You sent your letter of credit home yourself? Fine! That was right. You are not regretting so worthy a deed, are you? Come, you ought to be poor. It is time you learned how the other half lives. You are getting your course in human nature, you are in the school of the world. Be glad of your chance and smile."

Then Jane, the artist, and Jane, the woman, came face to face in the mirror, and both were smiling.

The next day was no sunnier than the one before, but Jane was quite certain that the mists were lifting, and she went out into the

snowy streets almost gayly. At Thirty-Fourth Street she helped an old woman cross Broadway, and when a begging child ran along beside her she had no money to give him, but she called him a dear little fellow and said she wished she had. What she was to do, how she intended to buy luncheon and dinner, she had no idea, but she walked on, possessed by a Micawber-like faith that something was bound to turn up before she was compelled to pawn the pearl necklace, her father's gift, that lay hidden under her severe collar.

All day she wandered about, looking for "Help Wanted" signs in the shop windows; straying into an employment office which reeked so of unwashed humanity that she staggered out, half-fainting; making the fruitless rounds of the dramatic agencies again; and finally spending the afternoon in the rest-room of a big department store, where at least it was warm. But at six even that haven closed, and Jane walked reluctantly out into the chill

dusk, reaching a hand up to where the necklace lay hidden. Should she — or not? She paused on the street corner uncertainly, and then stamped her foot.

To-morrow, if she must; but not to-night. Resolutely she turned her tired feet towards the dingy boarding-house that she called home.

It was rapidly growing dark, and Jane quickened her pace along the empty residence streets. Was some one following her? Jane had been nervous about that several times lately. Or was the tall man behind her merely a peaceful householder walking home to his dinner? Jane eyed him doubtfully, hurried even faster, and dived at last into her own burrow with a beating heart.

"That you, Miss South?"

The landlady's voice penetrated the fried-onion atmosphere of the hall like a fork, and struck terror to the pit of Jane's empty stomach. Until this moment she had forgotten that to-night Miss South must "pay or

vacate," and, clutching her flat purse, she leaned against the newel-post with no heart to do battle. The landlady flopped along the hall ominously, talking as she came.

"You got my room-rent to-night, Miss South?" she inquired. "I 'm a tender-hearted woman, Miss South, but since He was took (Mrs. Kelly always referred to the late Mr. Kelly with the capitalized pronoun reserved for the Deity) I ain't got no man to see I ain't scrowged on, an' with the gas-bill what it is, — not that they don't charge you whether you burn it or don't burn it, — an' coal ten dollars a ton, an' poor stuff at that, an' folks wantin' the best of isters an' chicken an' vegetables, in season or the depth of Jenooary — though when He was alive I could 'a' fed 'em hot-house strawberries like as if they 'd been water — which I mean to say, Miss South, I 'm a widder, an' I must have the cash money this evenin', an' no foolin', or kindly ask you to leave."

Before Jane could frame a reply, Mrs. Kelly's flight of oratory was punctuated by a tinkle of the rickety door-bell, and she waddled to the door, admitting some one after a short parley.

"There ain't no party here by that name, young man; but here 's Miss South, she jest come in, an' the first for fifteen minutes, so if you mean her, here she is." Then, turning to Jane, "I 'll see you again about that rent after your young man is went."

Jane rose uncertainly from the step, expecting she knew not what. The tall stranger removed his hat, with a greeting, and she gasped. It was Bryce Gordon.

In silence they stared at each other, while the landlady's slippers flopped down the hall. Then Mrs. Kelly, with her hand on the kitchen door-knob, flung back one last Parthian arrow:

"Three dollars an' seventy-five cents. Them 's my last words, an' when I say 'em, I mean 'em!"

Jane's lips twitched in spite of her, and Bryce, throwing back his head, laughed boyishly.

"That 's got Little Eva skinned a block," he chuckled. "As last words, those are peaches. Come into the mausoleum and let 's blow out the gas."

He turned cheerily into the grisly parlor — all boarding-houses are alike — and felt for the gas-jet with the ease of practice. With something half-way between a sob and a laugh, Jane followed him, and when he held out his hand she put hers into it with the sense of having found a friend.

"So you remember me," he said, ignoring her confusion. "The charity play is a long time ago."

"Indeed I do," answered Jane. It was the first word she had spoken. "You gave me something to think about that night. I 've often wished I could talk to you again."

"Well, here I am to be talked to — go as

far as you like," he replied cheerfully. "I saw you in the Waldorf, you know, and I 've had the greatest kind of adventure unraveling you since — regular Arabian Night."

"How much do you know, Caliph?" Jane, in spite of her hunger, could banter again.

"Not half enough. Suppose you tell me. Wait, though — no! It 's my night to howl over at the quarters, and there 'll be a bunch of ruffians there. Don't you want to come along with me and pick up Mrs. Beecher — you know her, the play-agent? — and when the clans have gathered you will have a glimpse of what you 'll probably insist on calling Bohemia."

Jane's eyes suddenly filled with tears of weakness, and Bryce turned away to the old piano, giving her an opportunity to hide them.

"Run along now and wash your face," he said, "and I 'll play 'Rock of Ages' on this bag-o'-bones to amuse Mrs. Cerberus while

you get ready. But I warn you, no Sunday edition."

"Sunday edition? I'm not a colored supplement," protested Jane in mock indignation, albeit with an uncertain note in her voice.

"Sunday edition — go-to-meetin' black satin — dingle-dangles and herring-bones and feather-stitches, and things like that," explained Bryce over his shoulder as he swung into "Funiculi Funicula." "Just wear your street clothes; you'll be mobbed else."

"All right," said Jane, feeling relieved that she did not have to dress. "I'll be down in ten minutes." And then at the door she hesitated half a second. "How — how late does it last?" she inquired. After all, she knew nothing of Bryce Gordon.

He glanced up keenly and, leaving "Funiculi" in the middle of a bar, strode swiftly over to Jane.

"Look here!" he said roughly, and Jane,

already ashamed of herself, looked into his steady gray eyes from which all the fun had vanished, leaving a wisdom, a sympathy, almost a tenderness that touched Jane to her very heart. The suspicion faded from her own eyes, the hardness melted, and instead of a woman in armed defense it was suddenly a little girl that returned his gaze bravely. He smiled at her reassuringly.

"Is it all right now?" he asked. And Jane, nodding, scampered up the stairs, illogically but nevertheless certainly assured of Bryce Gordon's faith. The merry chorus of "Funiculi Funicula" pursued her.

Ten minutes later they swung off together through the falling snow, more like old friends than acquaintances who had met only twice, and Jane was telling Bryce such of her story as he had not already succeeded in ferreting out.

Gordon knew more of Jane's story than she fancied. Her face, seen through the glass

door of the Waldorf, had made him uneasy, and her confusion at sight of him had increased his puzzlement. A few judicious questions at the agencies had done the rest, and it was the indignation of a knight for a captive princess rather than curiosity that had carried him on his Arabian Night quest. In spite of Bryce's experience with the world, he had not acquired the cynical passivity in the face of wrong that in Scribner had once so shocked Leslie. He admired Jane for her pluck, pitied her for her defenseless ignorance of the hard world, and discounted her vanity completely. So as they kept step through the snow-wreath he listened courteously to as much of her story as she chose to tell him, laughing gayly at her little attempts to make an amusing tale of her experiences, and wondering how best he could play the god from the machine.

Jane on her part chattered away, glad to talk to somebody who knew her language again; and by the time they had picked up

white-haired, merry Mrs. Beecher and gained the dismal entrance to Bryce's building, she had almost forgotten her empty stomach and flat purse. When they entered the low doorway of Bryce's quarters, she forgot them completely.

Flickering firelight and the pungent odor of burning pine, golden darts of candle-flame, blue tobacco-smoke and a group of thoroughly comfortable-looking people were Jane's first vivid impression of the place, before she was swallowed in hospitality. A big, yellow-haired man with the face of a viking took off her coat, and was introduced as "Oswald, who paints and sculps." She had seen his work at the Metropolitan and regarded him as a genius unapproachable. Somebody named "Jim," with a lop-sided, engaging face and twinkling brown eyes, took her hat and furs. Later she heard somebody call him by his full name and knew him for a "best seller." And a wizened-up little woman, who was "Sadie"

to the group, poured her a cup of tea with as motherly a graciousness as if she had not written a series of startling magazine articles that were advertised from one end of the country to the other. The viking put her in a big chair by the fire, saw that her tea suited her, and the whole company fell to talking again where the entrance of their host and his guests had interrupted the discussion.

As for Bryce, he hunted among the litter of papers on the workmanlike desk that dominated the room, found his pipe and filled it comfortably. The comic opera librettist sitting next Jane passed her his cigarette-case with the air of one realizing an omission, but Jane refused with a smile. Miss Dennison, worker in hand-made jewelry, reached across her shoulder and annexed the case.

"I 'll make you a better one than that, Joker," she commented, extracting an Egyptian cigarette and lighting it at a candle. "Gordon, show him yours."

Gordon got out his case, a hand-hammered silver one, with a coat-of-arms in blue enamel in one corner and a tiny turquoise studding the clasp.

"What is the crest?" asked Jane softly.

"Old southern family — war — lost everything — never recovered. Motto faithfulness — blue is for true," explained Miss Dennison, equally underbreath. "That 's the only thing his father left him — killed at Bull Run — sent the case back by a comrade — body never found."

"You 're forgetting the tapestry," put in Jim, nodding towards the long piece above the fireplace.

"I have been admiring it," answered Jane, who could appreciate rare pieces. "A genuine Gobelin, is n't it?"

Jim assented. "Looks like Tristram and Iseult, I always say," he added. "The hunter and his hounds faded to those soft warm tones. Remember?

"'On the arras wrought you see
A stately huntsman clad in green,
And round him a fresh forest-scene.
On that clear forest-knoll he stays,
With his pack round him, and delays.

. . . . . .

The wild boar rustles in his lair;
The fierce hounds snuff the tainted air,
But lord and hounds keep rooted there.'"

Jane rose to examine it more closely, thinking to herself how interesting these people were in comparison to the chattering crowd at her mother's receptions. The hot tea and the cakes had put courage into her; and the excitement of the new atmosphere had added a dash of color to her cheeks. As she rose, she noted a sudden small uproar in the group around the writing-table. Mrs. Beecher, a vivid little figure with the enthusiasm of everlasting youth, in spite of her white hair, was holding forth vivaciously, waving her arms at Bryce.

"Look at him!" she cried. "The coming playwright, ladies and gentlemen — the new

world of which I am the discoverer. All hear me and remember that I placed his play. Chadwick is keen about it! I 'm so glad I can tell you the news!"

Bryce smiled at her in grateful deprecation. Mrs. Beecher was one of his best friends. He had long ago got under her superficial gayety and rapier keenness and found the warm mother-heart beneath. She answered the look, covering it meanwhile with badinage.

"When 'The Price of Power' is on and bringing you — oh, let 's say a thousand a week, and ten per cent of that for little me, we 'll place 'The Fire Opal,' too."

"Oh, chuck 'The Fire Opal,'" protested Hartford, the dramatic critic. "Gordon can do better than that."

"Better!" retorted Mrs. Beecher. "Out upon you for a cynical old first-nighter that has lost all taste for champagne. I 've not placed twenty plays this season for nothing. I tell you 'The Price of Power' can't hold a

candle to 'The Fire Opal.' It reads bigger, but it is n't."

Bryce, embarrassed, objected.

"'The Fire Opal' is rank melodrama, and Hartford never loses a chance to give that a good prod with his toasting-fork."

"Oh — melodrama!" Mrs. Beecher turned swiftly to Jane, whose interested eyes she saw fixed upon the group.

"He 's got it in him, Miss South. 'The Fire Opal' is his first play and he 's ashamed to have me hawk it around. But young people write good plays because the emotions are still so strong in them. 'The Price of Power' has more brains, but less blood. Wait and see."

"You talk like a minor prophet," laughed Bryce good-naturedly, reaching for her cup, "but even Elijah was n't averse to refreshment. I 'm a perfectly good raven. Have some tea." And Mrs. Beecher was kindly submerged.

Jane turned back to the tapestry, her opinion of Bryce rising even higher as she perceived

the evident liking and respect the group bore him, and was suddenly arrested by the eyes of the viking, Oswald. He was looking at her intently, with the curious concentration of the artist. For a moment Jane felt as if she were wearing no clothes. But when he saw her regarding him he smiled like a friendly collie and relaxed his gaze, as the librettist they called " Joker " rose from his chair and yawned ostentatiously.

" There has n't been a good line sprung here to-night," he lamented, " and I 've got to hand in a bushel of wit to-morrow. Every laugh 's a dollar; who 'll give to the beggar? "

" You need a thousand new lines in that show of yours," remarked Hartford bluntly. " It 's the worst bunch of rot that ever set Broadway buying tickets."

" Not necessarily," commented Jim. " The chorus have swell figures."

" Well, that 's better than having a swelled head," retorted the librettist, heaving a cushion

at his ironical defender. "Harty uses vitriol for ink, and has a prussic-acid cocktail every morning before breakfast, and I 'll forgive him; but it 's tu quoque for yours. You 're tarred with the same brush, and you know it."

"I do know it," agreed Jim, settling the cushion behind his head comfortably. "Only wish I could con 'em into paying ten dollars for a box to my novels. The novel trade is going to the demnition bow-wows."

"By the way," put in Miss Dennison, "speaking of bow-wows, what happened to 'em last night? I did n't hear a yap out of our anvil chorus."

The Joker blushed unmistakably, to the frank delight of the company, and his chum Walworth, an auburn-bearded artist with twinkling blue eyes, laughed aloud. Miss Dennison flashed her quick black eyes from one to the other, and snapped out an accusing forefinger.

"What 's so funny?" she demanded.

"Joker, what have you been up to? Come, I see confession trembling on your tongue."

"No, you don't," corrected Walworth; "you see it trembling on mine. It's really too good to keep."

"Out with it!"

Walworth laughed again. "It was this way," he complied. "Joker, being a sensitive plant, has been done out of his four-o'clock-in-the-morning beauty sleep by the yow-yowing of Towser and Fido and Pinky-Panky-Poo across the way. Yesterday morning they killed a cat under his window, and he arose at the unspeakably early hour of half-past eleven, vowing vengeance, and calling upon everybody in the building to help him. Getting no enthusiastic war-party to assist him in going forth and abolishing the dogs forthwith, he went out alone, purchased sausages from a fat butcher, achieved a stock of poison at the druggist's, and returned to construct vindictive sandwiches."

"Joker!" reproached Miss Dennison. "You did n't!"

With a French gesture Walworth jumped to his feet, seized a bit of charcoal from the desk, and sketched swiftly on Bryce's wall. "My children, behold him," he continued, "with his so-fashionable coat, his fuzzy fedora, his polished boots, wandering down the street, a string of dogs behind him, and giving each one a link. It was a sight worth seeing." Walworth roughed in the slender, dandyish figure of the Joker, followed by beseeching curs. "Thus. Ah, it was a great dog-day. He returned, lacking in virtue, but content. He vowed that to-night we should all rest in peace. He went to bed early. Likewise did the dogs, full of sausage. To-day—" He paused dramatically.

The Joker arose from the divan, and waved a sheepish hand. "If you 're done," he remarked acidly, "I 'll finish the story. When I went out this morning the same string of

dogs followed to lick my hand. They had come for more sausage."

The crowd laughed with mingled relief and amusement. Miss Dennison wrinkled her brow.

"Pull the string, Bunty," she commanded. "What's the answer? You said he bought poison."

"Or what he thought was such," returned Walworth. "The trouble was that he asked Bryce Gordon what was a good poison to buy, and Bryce, having humanitarian ideas, advised him to load up with harmless bicarbonate of soda. It agreed with the dogs like a tonic."

The crowd laughed again uproariously, applauding Bryce, and the Joker blushed again. The laughter was interrupted by a shout from the door, where a deep-chested, broad-shouldered man in evening clothes and silk hat stood looking in on them.

"Bedlam!" he declared, marching, big and

handsome, into the middle of the room. They greeted him with raillery.

"Oh, see the dude!"

"No place for him here. Put him out!"

"Beat it back to Fifth Avenoo!"

"He 's full of the Four Hundred's baked meats. Put him out!"

Instead they kept him very much in. They took off his collar and white dress-tie. They draped a piece of oriental embroidery about him so that it trailed behind, and in bib effect covered his expanse of dress-shirt front; they crowned him with an impromptu turban achieved from a towel and a whisk-broom; and they assailed him meanwhile with gibes.

"Did they give you enough to eat?"

"Whom did you take in? And did she talk in five flats, and ask you if you did n't think Schumann had so much soul?"

"And after they had fed you did they wait a decent time before they asked you to sing, or was it very banal?"

Jane's wondering eyes caught Gordon's, for the first time in half an hour. At first he had kept a careful eye on her to see that she was comfortable and not bored, and then had left her to get acquainted with the rest of "the ruffians." Now he had found his way to her side. He explained, laughingly:

"He 's just come from the Cashmeres' musicale."

"Oh, I know them," said Jane quickly. "Elizabeth Cashmere was once my roommate." And then she was sorry she had spoken, for Bryce's laughter died.

"I 'm sorry," he said gravely. "It 's too bad you 've heard all this. Of course it 's just good-natured chaff, but one hates to have one's friends discussed."

"It does n't matter," she answered. "I won't be seeing them any more. Who is he?"

"Henry Law."

"Not the concert singer?"

"The same," smiled Bryce. "And a mighty good fellow."

"Oh!" breathed Jane enthusiastically. "Not really! You are giving me a treat."

"Do you like them?"

"I 'm afraid of them. They know so much; they all do so much. And, after all, I 'm only an actress out of a job. I feel lost among them."

"Oswald likes you. He says you have a very interesting face."

Now this was the truth so far as it went, but it was not the whole truth. What Oswald really had said was that Jane was an interesting type, — "an epicurean turned stoic, a sybarite among the husks," — and had commented on the way the bones of her skull were beginning to show through the flesh-padding about the temples and cheeks. Bryce had immediately commandeered an olive sandwich from Jim and brought it to Jane. Now he stood watching her eat it with an anxious look

in his eyes. It was quite true that she was thinner than when he had seen her at the Van Muellers' reception and charity play. But he had no more time to talk to her, for the others had swept Henry Law over to the piano, and were calling upon Bryce to accompany him.

CHAPTER VIII

"Come over here, Gordon, and play the hand-organ for the monkey," Law commanded. "Now that we've sung for Mammon, we'll sing for love. Let's give 'em the 'Hunting Song.'"

With a crash Gordon brought his sensitive hands down on the keys in a full chord like a trumpet-call, and the big baritone rang out in the gallant words of the song:

"Oh, who would stay indoor, indoor,
When the hunt is on the hill? (Tarantara!)
With the crisp air stinging and the huntsmen singing,
And a ten-tined buck to kill!"

Again the splendid stormy chords of the piano. Bryce had no notes — needed none. He was a strong, intelligent accompanist, and Law sang his best when Bryce was at the keys.

A veritable caricature the great singer looked in his absurd apron and turban, but no one thought of that. The marvelous voice carried them away from the shaded and fire-lit study; and every man of them was on the heather-tufted hills with a good horse's heart pounding against his leg and the rush of the wind in his ears.

"Before the sun goes down, goes down,
We shall slay the buck of ten. (Tarantara!)
And the priest shall say benison and we shall ha'e venison
When we come home again.

"Let him that loves his ease, his ease,
Keep close and house him fair. (Tarantara!)
He 'll still be a stranger to the merry thrill of danger,
And the joy of the open air."

The Joker moved uneasily in his seat. Miss Dennison, little pinch of fire and steel that she was, sat bolt upright, her black eyes alight, her hands gripped on the arm of her chair, remembering the unfenced prairies whence she came, and the trail where one rode by a scar on the mountain-side thirty miles away. The

Joker had always been too indolent to ride a horse.

"But he that loves the hills, the hills,
Let him come out to-day. (Tarantara!)
For the horses are neighing and the hounds are baying
And the hunt 's up and away!"

It ended on a splendid note that swept one irresistibly on. For two minutes there was dead silence, and then a storm of applause.

"That 's great!" said Oswald. "Don't try to cap that — you can't do it, Harry. Give us something in another vein."

"Sing that recitative thing you sang over at Frithiof's the other night," suggested Hartford dryly. "That 's worth any amount of huntsmen."

"That 's queer," said Law, glancing at the critic. "I did n't see you there."

"I did n't intend you should," returned Hartford. "I merely looked in for a minute, and the minute was a fortunate one, when you were singing. I never heard you in better voice. Let 's have it again."

Law turned to Gordon. "It 's 'Never Give All the Heart' he wants. Just play me those same bass chords you did at Frithiof's."

"That 's a depressing thing," said Bryce, turning to the keyboard with a shade of reluctance. "Sounds like the end of the world."

But Law was singing. It hardly sounded like a song at all, and the little audience listened doubtfully.

"Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women, if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss—"

Miss Dennison moved impatiently, and glanced over at Hartford, who sat wrinkled and impassive as a Chinese joss, his eyes lowered absently, yet with a look of listening about him that one could almost feel. The wonderful voice of the singer gathered intensity.

"For everything that 's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.
O, never give the heart outright!"

That was a cry of bitterness and disillusion. Jane caught her breath with the pain of it.

"For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play,
And who could play it well enough
If deaf . . . and dumb . . . and blind with love?

He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart — and lost!"

"What the dickens is that?" demanded Jim uncertainly of the Joker.

"'Never Give All the Heart,'" explained the Joker cheerfully. "It's dramatic as hell, is n't it, — though it is n't much of a lyric."

"There are more things than its dramatic quality that are like hell," observed the old critic briefly. "Thank you, Law."

Gordon rose from the piano and returned to where Jane and Mrs. Beecher were sitting by the fire.

"You did n't play that so well, Bryce," said the older woman, making room for him on the settle.

"No." Bryce looked annoyed. "I don't like the thing. More than that, I don't believe it. Do you?"

"No. . . . I did once."

"You!" Bryce's tone was incredulous. The little woman smiled.

"You 'll go through it too, some day."

"Never!" Bryce was emphatic. "The world is a lot better than that, and I know it. You don't want me to be a cynic with a liver, do you? That 's what cynicism is mostly, I think — pure indigestion. As long as a man keeps himself in condition he thinks the world is a pretty good place."

Mrs. Beecher smiled wisely again, and old Hartford, leaning forward in his chair, reached out to tap Bryce on the shoulder.

"Keep up your athletics, Gordon, and hang on to your illusions as long as you can. But let me tell you this: You 'll never write a great play until you learn what that song tells you — and learn it for yourself. Then you may

write a play which will live, though it may not make you happy. Your disease is youth."

"May I never be cured," said Gordon cheerfully. "I'd rather be happy than own the greatest bunch of manuscript misery ever penned. In fact, as for your drama, — pshaw, Bernard," he added. "I'm never going to break my heart for art's sake. I'm going to eat three meals a day when I can get 'em, and believe in a God and a good world. Let's have an antidote," and, jumping up, he swung again into "Funiculi Funicula's" irresistible gayety of rhythm.

Jane, regarding his interesting features as shown up by the piano light, studied him shrewdly for a moment, and wondered what she could do with him if she should try. She didn't want to break his heart, of course — not exactly — but she measured the chances of battle instinctively and smiled just a little to herself. She thought she could make Bryce have some new emotions, if she chose; and

she ended by pluming herself on her kind forbearance and her superior wisdom.

With "Funiculi" the other song's spell was broken, and the evening ended merrily, with the Joker cordially inviting everybody to a sausage supper at his next "at home." Laughing sincere regrets, the guests went for their wraps, and Jane found hers with those of the other women in Gordon's bedroom — a severe room, spotlessly clean and orderly and bare. Only above the bed there was a tiny quilt, embroidered in pink and blue flowers and framed like a picture.

"What a quaint, old-fashioned piece," remarked Jane to Miss Dennison. "What is it?" But that observing young woman had neglected to note it, and none of the other women knew. On the way home she asked Bryce about it. He looked at her very quietly for a moment, and she was afraid she should not have asked. Then he looked away and said gently:

"My mother made it. She died when I was born."

. . . . . .

"Now," said Gordon to Chadwick, two days later, "you have seen Miss South and heard her voice. What's your answer?"

The manager stuck his fat hands in his pockets with the air of a man who is ill at ease.

"I tell you, Gordon, it's a big risk," he growled. "I can't afford to be taking chances with a first play. She ain't known. Her name ain't worth shucks. I say take Seline."

"Give Miss South a chance and she'll get all the following Seline has, and more. She has brains, and Seline uses her head only as an ornament."

Chadwick shook his head irritably.

"No, no! Forget it! I'd rather spend a few more dollars and get an experienced ingénue. Take your girl over to Moughton's and let 'em give her a part."

"You know what Brothers & Lang did. I 'm cutting the agencies out these days. You must cast her here."

Chadwick's temper rose. After all, Gordon was only the author.

"Must, huh?" he demanded. "Must nothing! Who 's putting up the money for your old play? Who 's payin' the bills here, huh? Must! I tell you she 's not the type and I don't want her."

Gordon's eyes grew suddenly sharp as steel.

"I see no objection to a brunette ingénue."

"It 's not that — not that," argued Chadwick. "She is n't it, that 's all. We want Seline."

"Seline! Hang Seline!" thundered Bryce. "What I said, goes."

"Who 's the manager of this theater?"

"Never mind about the manager. Miss South is going on in this, or you 'll never get a chance at another play of mine."

Chadwick's secret faith in "The Price of

Power" was very great, which fact Gordon knew. The manager hedged.

"Don't try to bluff me, Gordon."

But the steady eyes that met Chadwick's held no hint of yielding, and uneasily Chadwick shifted his own glance.

"Does she get the part?" Gordon said quietly.

Chadwick hung off as long as he dared. But he succumbed in the end and gravely engaged Jane. Bryce Gordon had succeeded in being her god from the machine, and she was grateful as only those who have looked hunger in the face know how to be. Indeed she shrewdly suspected him of being behind Mrs. Beecher's motherly friendship and the loan of ten dollars which she had tucked into Jane's hand the day after Bryce's party. But she had accepted both humbly, along with the opportunity to lay her head on Mrs. Beecher's shoulder for a comfortable cry, in which the bitterness of the last weeks was washed away; and turn-

ing over a new leaf, began a pleasanter chapter.

Scribner heard of the turn in Jane's fortunes through Brothers & Lang, and, furious at her good luck and her refusals to see him, planned a characteristic bit of revenge. On his return to Chicago he managed that the newspapers should learn that Jane was not in Europe with Mrs. Van Mueller, but in New York, an actress, and a *protégée* of Bryce Gordon, an untried playwright. Jane's name was worth a column on the front page any day, and instantly the story of her disappearance and adventures was blazoned forth. Pictures and articles that had been run during her social career again adorned the front pages of all the dailies, and the Carringtons, used to having a comfortable appreciation of publicity, now shrank from the sight of a reporter or a printed page. It is one thing to enjoy somebody else's scandal over one's breakfast coffee, and quite another to behold one's own

name in that deadly block type. Mr. and Mrs. Carrington grew harder than ever towards Jane.

But it was good news to Chadwick, and, seeing the advertising value her name would lend to his show, he hastened to court her.

"It's the best thing that could have happened," he chuckled gleefully, rubbing his fat hands. "The show will be a hit now, sure. With Jane Carrington on the program, the house will be packed. Why didn't you tell me before?"

He took occasion to say this when Beatrice Drake, the star, was not listening. Jane did not flinch outwardly. She had learned to accept Chadwick and his type for what they were. She merely said quietly:

"I prefer not to use that name."

"Not? Well, what do you know about that?"

She interrupted him. "Mr. Gordon will speak to you about it."

Bryce spoke in favor of her using her true name.

"Everybody knows who 'Cecelia South' is now. You can do no good by hiding your real name. Some day you will be great, and by your fame you can redeem this present notoriety."

Jane acquiesced without further discussion. Chadwick instantly advertised her in letters almost as big as those devoted to the star, and the ticket man at the box-office did a rushing business. Rehearsals were pushed to the limit, lest the opening come too late to take advantage of the free advertising they were getting, and Jane found life hard. Chadwick was noted for his sarcastic tongue, and it seemed to her that she never could get anything to please him. The hours of rehearsal, from nine o'clock until six, with a few minutes off at noon for a sandwich, tried her, unused to confinement or monotony, and the loneliness preyed upon her, accustomed to many friends.

Mrs. Beecher she saw only occasionally, for they were both busy; Bryce Gordon often, for naturally they were thrown together at the theater and had many things to discuss with each other about the play. Gradually she came to depend more and more on Bryce for companionship, and on the Thursday evening conclaves in his rooms for relaxation. Sometimes in the course of the evening fifteen or twenty people would drop in; sometimes there would be only herself and Mrs. Beecher, with Oswald lounging in the Morris chair, silent, as usual, and smoking his briar. But always it was interesting, and Jane grew to feel herself one of them, free to come and go too, and like them, strive to justify her existence and earn her daily bread. Bryce's mere presence, too, came to be comforting. Once she said as much to him.

"You shoulder all my troubles," she had remarked, half-laughingly. "I can feel them sliding off me the minute you come in."

He had looked at her rather queerly, and made some careless reply. Afterwards she had remembered the look and wondered if he had thought her bold. But he was just the same as usual the next time she saw him, and she decided his expression had been merely her own fancy. Bryce was a good chum.

As for Gordon, he found Jane more interesting than any woman he had ever known. Neither making eyes nor acting motherly, she impressed him as unusual. Moreover, she could think. They had glorious discussions about the play. Sometimes they made holiday and went into the country together, where confidences come easily. Gordon had told her about his college days, his southern home; and, lured on by her mobile face, had given her a glimpse of his ambitions and dreams. He had understood women easily enough, he thought, but it was seldom that a woman had understood him. Did Jane understand? At least, she was enticingly interested, and Bryce,

after he had left her, usually wondered at his own unreserve. With the curious self-examination of the writer, to whom his own soul is always possible copy, he investigated his feelings towards her, but without coming to any very definite conclusion.

"You 're tired," he greeted her one Sunday morning. "Let 's get out of this."

"Where to?" Jane's eyes were undeniably dark-ringed above her gay morning gown.

"Oh, into the wilds of the Bronx. We may find —"

"What?"

"Perhaps St. George and his dragon — or maybe a piece of the country east of the sun and west of the moon — or say some Mayflowers. Come along, anyway. A walk will do you good."

"I 'll be ready in ten minutes. But I warn you now I won't be polite to the dragon."

"We 'll abolish the dragon, then. Put on your rubbers — it 's wet outside."

It was the very earliest of early April out-of-doors. Timidly the pussy-willows were putting out gray noses, and here and there a poplar catkin hung. The sun shone on the wet road, and the pools along the wayside reflected blue sky and a dark fretwork of branches. Jane and Bryce splashed along gayly, talking of many things, and with satisfaction he noticed the clear color creeping up under her pale cheeks. At last he found a sheltered spot on a south hillside, under the lee of some firs. Spreading his overcoat for Jane, he lighted an aromatic little fire of birch and pine and produced two big red apples.

"It looks like the first house here," he said contentedly, as Jane sank her teeth gratefully into the Baldwin. "The first fire and the first lunch — and the first woman."

Jane laughed. "The first woman did n't have any problems. Life is getting too complex for me — yesterday was the rainiest

April second for two hundred and twenty-three years. Besides, people were — horrid." Her face suddenly clouded and she made a disgusted little pout at the recollection.

"Some brute again?"

"Ugh! yes. He took my arm on the street and told me he admired my nerve. I wish Chadwick could be induced to withdraw the statement that I 'm going to play."

Bryce doubled up his fist and looked at it absently.

"I had no idea it would cause so much comment when I insisted on your playing in 'The Price of Power.' It 's been beastly, has n't it?"

"Between well-meaning friends and curious reporters I have n't had much peace. Somebody was around with a kodak last night when I went home, but I pulled down my veil and scuttled up the front steps like a scared rabbit. I hope their plate 's spoiled."

Bryce said something savagely. "I beg

your pardon. It makes me furious to see you enduring all this alone. I must never miss taking you home after rehearsal again. Then I can have the satisfaction of knocking their heads off, anyhow."

"No, I won't allow it. You've your own work, and I can't take you off it just to squire me around. Remember, Cecelia South has learned a lot of things that Jane Carrington did n't know, among them how to wear duck-feathers that shed talk like raindrops. But I wish Chadwick would let me change my name."

"Take mine."

It was suddenly a voice that Jane Carrington did not know, and surprised, she turned to look at him. But he lay quietly on the pine-needles, elaborately engaged in rooting up a partridge-berry vine, and she decided it was only a joke.

"Look out! What if I should accept?"

"Jane!"

It was plainly earnest now, and instantly Jane became grave.

"Don't, Bryce! You must n't."

"Why not?"

"Because I 'm not a 'marriage-girl' any more. I 'm a working woman, anxious to succeed in my career. I never thought of you that way, — you and I are too good friends, — don't spoil everything."

He controlled himself with an effort and turned on her a quiet face of reassurance.

"I 'm not spoiling anything, or asking you to do anything you can't do freely. If you were a man, I 'd say, 'Come along and keep bachelor hall with me.' Because you wear petticoats I can't do that, but I can give you the protection of my name, and shield you from all this talk that 's abroad, and see that you 're fed and warm at least; and incidentally, have a comrade in the house."

"You mean we should go through a form

of marriage and remain friends — just as we are?"

"Exactly." Bryce's tone was excellently matter-of-fact.

"But, Bryce, think what a short time we 've known each other!"

"Friendship is n't a matter of time. You and I know each other as well as if we 'd played marbles together. Don't we, Jane?"

"Ye-es. I 've never been so friendly with any man before as I 've been with you."

"Well," he smiled at her joyfully, "there 's nothing to be afraid of."

"Suppose I met some one else — or you did?"

"Do you think you will?"

"Who can tell? We can't blink the possibility."

"Well, if such a thing should happen, you will tell me and then you shall have your freedom at once. We 'll make that a part of the bargain."

"And you? Suppose you meet — "

He interrupted. "I 'll risk that," he said.

Jane flickered a look up at him from under her eyelids — the woman-look at the man. Their friendship had come to be very sweet. Perhaps — she wondered how it would seem to be married to Bryce — and remain friends. Then the feminine instinct shrank.

"Oh, I can't. It is n't fair to you."

"I 'm the judge of that. If the pleasure of having you opposite me at breakfast and on the other side of the fireplace in the evening seems to me an even exchange for that, you don't need to worry. You can't lose anything, and I 'm going into this with my eyes open."

"That 's the trouble. I can't lose. Are you sure that you are n't deceiving yourself in this?"

"Not a bit. We 're both lonely and need companionship. I 'm simply fixing it so we can work together without Mrs. Grundy's

holding up her black lace mits in horror at us. Can't you trust me?"

"I do — oh, I'm not afraid of that with you. But if I should take up with this bargain of yours, there can't be any — love — allowed."

"That's all right. Nobody said anything about love. It's a business and friendly arrangement. Remember, too, if you're married to me, nobody can object to your playing, or try to take steps to prevent it. Is it a go — comrade?"

"Wait!" Jane put her hands to her temples. "Wait — let me think!"

But in the end she yielded, and married Bryce Gordon, to the delight of the reporters, who had another chance to write up the brilliant and erratic Jane Carrington.

CHAPTER IX

Outside the Carrington mansion it was a dreary, cold, wet day. The sky was dull, the lake a sullen gray; and the waves heaved ceaselessly up and down without breaking. The Drive was deserted except for a disgusted tomcat picking his way among the puddles and a white gull that breasted up against the fitful wind, crying dismally into the emptiness of the gathering dusk.

In the somber library Leslie and Scribner had quarreled for an hour, and the temper of neither was improved. Leslie huddled herself into one corner of the massive davenport, hugging one arm as if she felt she needed support. Scribner walked sulkily up and down the room with his shoulders hunched forward and his hands in his pockets. Presently Leslie returned to the attack.

"I think it 's perfectly mean of you to talk about Jane like that."

"I 'm not saying anything that is n't true," he replied, pausing at one end of his march. "Can you deny it?"

"Well, that 's no reason why you need torment me with it, is it?"

"Do you think I 'm not tormented, too? Did you see that column in *Town Chat* about our broken engagement?"

"The one that said 'Serves you right'? Yes, I did."

Walter winced. When he planned his little revenge on Jane he had not counted on the latest turn of events. Leslie, although she knew nothing of Walter's hand in the recent publicity, saw with satisfaction that she had struck home. She had been getting more and more wretched all the long, gloomy day, and for the last half hour had been choking back a lump in her throat. Now he looked down at her unpleasantly.

"I have had to endure a good many things lately."

"Oh, you 're always talking about yourself," she answered. "Don't you ever stop to think of me; that — that I — I 'm lonesome?"

The last word sounded so dismal in her own ears that she began to cry now in good earnest, and Walter, who disliked tears, came over to stop the flood.

"There, Leslie, don't cry," he said, sitting down beside her and patting her hand. He meant to solace her and was somewhat taken aback when his sympathy, instead, encouraged her to more tears and an abandonment of conventionality. Down went her head on his shoulder and she buried her nose in his coat with a muffled wail. Her hair was the shade of Jane's and her voice, although half stifled in cloth, had the same quality. Walter hesitated a second and then, retaining possession of her fingers, put his other hand rather heavily on her shoulder and let her weep.

"I can't help it, Scribie," mourned Leslie, letting a series of drops dampen his fashionable tie. "Jane's left us and gone on the stage, and mother is cross, and father never speaks at all and is n't a bit like himself. This house is just exactly like a tomb. And then you come and say horrid things, and I just positively hate you, I do! Oh, dear! I wish I 'd never been born."

To this Scribner said nothing. He was thinking of a dark-eyed girl dining with him at the Waldorf. If he had been a little less direct — if he had let her get a little hungrier —

"Jane did n't have to marry you," went on Leslie, hunting for her handkerchief. "She had as much right as anybody to change her mind."

"Indeed!"

"She did! She did! And I 'm glad she married Bryce Gordon and is happy, and I 'll never be angry with her, no matter what father says."

"You think she did right in deceiving everybody?"

"I don't care! Wrong things always seemed right when Jane did them. And anyway, I think father ought to forgive her."

"If your father had not seen fit to disown her I could scarcely feel that I could come into this house with any measure of self-respect," said Walter acidly.

"Oh!" gasped Leslie, raising her head as the significance of this dawned upon her. "Oh, you are hateful! Let me go! Take your hand off my shoulder! I hate you! I love Jane and I hate anybody that does n't, and I 'd go to her in a minute if I could. When I can go to New York nobody shall stop me — not even you."

Anger brought fire to her eyes and strength to her delicate features. Her increased resemblance to Jane gave Walter an unexpected emotion and he was angry when she ran from the room. He had really tried to forget Jane, and

now Leslie, whom he had always regarded as a little tractable kitten, had suddenly defied him — and interested him. Instead of accepting her peremptory dismissal he would remain for dinner and try to bring her to terms.

Mrs. Carrington, returning from a shopping tour, greeted him as he anticipated.

"You will dine with us, Walter?"

"With pleasure, if you will accept me as I am."

"We are alone evenings now — we have no heart for anything." She let her gloves slip heedlessly to the floor, and sighed. "It is a wretched day. I am all unstrung. It is a little more than three months since she left."

"Mrs. Carrington, we must try to be strong."

"Oh, I feel for you, too," she answered hastily, discerning a shade of rebuke in his voice. "We must help each other. John will not speak her name; we sit in silence. Walter, how could she marry so?"

"I don't know."

"No wedding gown, nothing, just a common plebeian ceremony."

"It was to have been so different."

"To think of not knowing the day, not even being able to think of her and wish her happiness. She never leaves my thoughts. At night I lie awake, wondering how she is getting home from the theater; if she is going alone, or if he is with her."

They heard Mr. Carrington come into the hall, and with unwonted slowness take off his coat and gloves, almost as if he regretted that he had reached home. His tread was reluctant as he came into the library and his greeting preoccupied. There was no play of expression on his face, only stern, set lines.

"Good evening, Walter."

The two men shook hands. Then Mr. Carrington went to kiss his wife coldly on the forehead.

"Busy day?" suggested Scribner in an attempt to bridge the pause.

"Very."

"I heard to-day that this weather is bad for the crops."

"Yes."

"Will this affect your business?"

"Yes."

Mr. Carrington was so uncommunicative, in spite of Walter's worthy attempts to draw him out, that the announcement of dinner came as a welcome break to a situation that was growing intolerably strained. At the table, Leslie endeavored to keep up a chatter about things furthermost from the topic nearest to all. She knew that she must be as brave as Jane would have been if placed in such a position, and she made the effort, proving herself to be a real tactician in spite of her immaturity. She continued to call Walter "Scribie," but he knew by the angry little glances she shot at him now and again that he was not to take

her talking to him as a sign of her forgiveness. This unyielding attitude served only to whet his interest, and he was determined now that he would call again the next day and attempt to get himself back into her good graces. Leslie was becoming more interesting as she grew up.

As he fastidiously ate his dessert and talked pleasant banalities to Mrs. Carrington, the clock struck eight in Bryce Gordon's New York study, and Jane, tired and cold, came into the room she called her home. It had an air of home about it now that Jane had added her personal treasures, — two or three enameled jewel cases, several favorite prints and some heavily embroidered Japanese scarfs. On the tea-table, always ready for a chance guest, stood her silver vase filled with fresh violets, Bryce's one extravagance because she was fond of them.

It had been a long day of shopping, rehearsal and trying on of costumes. Jane put

her parcels down on the couch, took off her hat and coat, and went down on her knees to light the ready-laid fire. As it flashed up with a swift, tindery crackle, the flames threw her face into relief. It was thinner, but its expression was very sweet.

Then, instead of thinking how tired she was, she unwrapped the parcels she had brought in and began to lay a tea-table with dainty morsels from the delicatessen store. Every now and then she glanced at the clock or listened to footsteps passing. Bryce was late.

At last some one paused. The knob turned, and Jane looked up with a greeting smile.

"I thought you 'd never get here," she said, busy with an olive bottle. "And where did you get the daisies?"

As she turned to the table, Bryce kissed the cluster of white-and-gold blossoms before he laid them down.

"They made me think of spring," he said

in the boyish tone that always touched Jane. "I was hunched up in my overcoat, with the wind whistling down my collar-bone, and they came right out of a florist's window and grabbed at my pocket."

"Boo-oo!" Jane shivered. "The Spring-timiest thing I've seen is that blessed grate fire. But they are lovely, just the same. I must put them in water."

"They'll be our center-piece. I had the same inspiration for supper here that you did. Look! — I bought all this stuff."

They laughed over their similar selection of eatables, and then Jane picked up the daisies, arranging them carefully in a Japanese jar. Bryce watched her with wistful eyes.

"I hardly know this place any longer," he observed. "You've made a home out of a barrack."

"It takes a woman to muss up a man's pet belongings, does n't it? What 's the bachelor's motto — a chair for everything and everything

on its chair? Give me one good mark, any way; I never dust your desk."

He smiled and glanced over to the manuscript-piled table where lay the half-finished draft of his novel. Jane, though she did not know it yet, had taken possession of the novel as she had of the rooms. Bryce's heart and soul were full of her, but he dared not tell her of his love, lest she break the compact that bound them together and vanish like a butterfly, alarmed.

"Do I add another egg to this?" she asked, pausing above the chafing-dish, and startling him from his momentary reverie. He jumped up and took possession of the spoon, swiftly.

"Hold on! You've got enough for a regiment."

"'Scuse me!" Jane put the egg away gingerly. "You don't know how hungry I am. . . . Why didn't I ever take up domestic science? I've had courses in almost everything

else; but you can't eat place-cards and shadow-embroidery. Your cookery dazzles me."

"We 'll fill you up and get that tired look out of your face in a minute," said Bryce, stirring skillfully, and wondering if Jane knew how his pulses throbbed at her nearness. "It 's been a hard day, has n't it?"

"Oh, fretty. The dressmaker stood me up with pins in me for hours, and rehearsal was annoying."

"I thought it went better to-day than usual."

Even so small a compliment pleased Jane. "Did you really think I 'd improved? I 've tried so hard on that bit at the end of the second act."

"I noticed it. You got it across splendidly. But Beatrice Drake does n't seem to be doing any better."

"She 's out of harmony with her part, I think."

"Chadwick says it will be a go, anyway."

"Oh, of course. It 's going to take like hot cakes. Why, that play is your future and mine — it must succeed — we must win together."

"Here 's hoping."

Bryce added a dash of paprika to the eggs and helped Jane to a generous portion.

"Hoping, indeed," said Jane with her first bite. "The very daisies are looking at you reproachfully for the shadow of a doubt about it."

"The daisies are impertinent," said Bryce imperturbably. "Also, they are hiding you from me. . . . There, that 's better. Now I can look at you undisturbed."

Jane felt herself blushing, and to hide it jumped up and busied herself with the tea-kettle. She chided herself for the blush — it was unreasonable of her, she told herself. Bryce meant nothing but a friendly compliment, and here she was blushing as if they were more to each other than good friends. She came back to the table with cheerful

matter-of-factness on her face, and ate scrambled eggs with an appetite.

"Sure you aren't regretting anything, Jane?" said Bryce presently in a sober tone. "You're risking a lot in this venture of mine. Don't you ever want to go back to the fleshpots?"

"No." Jane was swiftly sure. "I'm just beginning to get the savour of life."

"Does it seem complete?"

"Quite complete. I never had so much real pleasure out of existence since I was born."

Bryce lowered his eyes in a disappointment that she must not see. She was unawakened, untouched, comradely in a blank indifference to the love that tore at him whenever she was by. Perhaps when the play was a success she might be different, less absorbed. Surely work would not be enough for her always.

Jane was busy with other thoughts.

"Bryce, why won't you tell me about your novel? You were so enthusiastic about it yes-

terday that I nearly broke my promise not to read it until after the opening night."

"Oh, it's only a rough draft yet. I told you about it the day you asked me to help you choose your hat. Don't you remember? I said the black-eyed-Susans were like your eyes."

"You haven't even told me its name."

He laughed at her pouting face. "I shall call it after you, Mrs. Gordon."

"Now you are making fun of me."

"Of course I am. How could one help it? When you look like that I lose the regal Jane and see only a little girl."

"I'm old enough to be married."

"So you are. And happy?"

"Of course. Bryce, you're a dear — truly you are."

He leaned toward her quickly and brushed his hand lightly across her hair. Jane smiled up at him, accepting the caress without emotion, and he gripped himself to keep from tak-

ing her in his arms. Instead, he nodded in the direction of the novel.

"If the play is n't a success, that stuff burns on the opening night. I 've risked everything on this turn of the wheel. If it does make a hit, you shall read it — every word."

Jane was so tired after they had cleared away the tea-things that for a moment she wished Bryce would complete the caress he had half made. She wanted to be petted, to put her head on his shoulder and feel that some one was stronger than she. For weeks there had been no one to mother her, now that Kate was gone, and to-night she felt the need of a human touch desperately. She watched his fingers as he filled his pipe, and wished she could slip her own into their strong grasp. He looked so comfortable, so homelike, sitting in the chair at the other side of the hearth, his pipe between his lips, the blue smoke rising in lazy spirals! If she could only get down on her knees before him and pillow her head on his arm and whis-

per how much she honored him for his courtesy, kindness, thoughtfulness; if she could only relax and let the weight of existence drop from her shoulders! Not once had Bryce offended her in word or action; and yet he was all a man. Jane shut her eyes and nestled closer into her big chair. Of course she could n't do it; they were only comrades, and if she made any advances it would be embarrassing for him.

It was not until she seemed asleep that Bryce permitted himself to gaze at her steadily, taking in every feature of her face, every line of her relaxed body, with a look that seemed to kiss and adore. At first he looked at her tenderly, as at a gift given him to treasure, to wonder at, not to touch but to keep sacred, even from himself. But from whom was he protecting her? Was there any with a better claim than his? Dared there be any one? If she wished it — perhaps — and yet could he not demand her love, find out if her cheeks felt

as much like cool rose-leaves as they looked, if her lips were not a thousand times sweeter than he guessed?

"A mean, cowardly, despicable advantage!" cried Conscience. "You are not worthy of her. You have never made a success of anything. She is in the world for you to worship — nothing more."

Pale to his lips, Bryce sprang from his chair and, forcing himself away in the direction of his desk, spoke sharply.

"You 're falling asleep. You had better go to bed and get your rest."

She had not been asleep, but, startled and hurt by his tone, she rose slowly and gathered up her hat and coat.

"I 'm sorry to have kept you up," she said humbly, and then left the room hurriedly, that she might hide her lonely tears.

After the door had closed, Bryce seized her forgotten muff and crushed his lips against it.

CHAPTER X

However strangely the nights passed — and later the memory of many of them was very sweet — the days were too full of serious work to permit of romantic meditation. In the morning Jane would hurry off alone to the theater, leaving Bryce engrossed with the novel growing on his desk. A few hours later he would follow to see how the interpretation of his play was progressing, only to go away every afternoon more angered at the liberties the manager and actors had taken with his text. He had tried to object in the beginning, but as the professionals in the business of the theater treated his remarks as the impractical vaporings of an amateur, he had come to accept their innovations in furious silence and to look forward to the opening night as a condemned man awaits the hour of his hanging.

Jane gave him all the encouragement she could, and that was more than she felt. Hour by hour the play grew worse in her eyes. The endless rehearsals, the long fittings of costumes, were beginning to tell on her health. She felt herself growing nervous and petulant; she had to make an unusual effort to remember her cues; she had to write down errands lest she forget them; she often caught herself in the rehearsals, when her whole attention should have been concentrated on her part, thinking of home and the years she had spent there. She began to dislike her work; she felt depressed in her pale blue and green costumes and longed for the warm, invigorating rose and cherry shades selected by the star. She chafed under the rigid managerial discipline, shivered at sight of the black auditorium, and hated the actor with whom most of her scenes were cast. Her nights were restless, thoughts of Bryce dancing mad dances in her mind with the lines of her part and the fear of failure.

When the Monday came at last, she dragged herself to the theater. There a black cat crossed her path, and the superstitious members of the company looked at each other forebodingly.

"How is the rehearsal going?" they asked, in real need of encouragement, as Bryce came back from the stage box.

"I never wrote the play," he cried hopelessly. "It 's the most absurd thing that ever stumbled on its legs. I disclaim all ownership."

The actors groaned and Jane fled, white with fear, to her dressing-room. She did not see how they could ever face the public that was awaiting them, the public that numbered so many of her curious acquaintances.

And that night they were all there, in the boxes and orchestra, where the footlights showed up their familiar, smiling faces. They received the star's entrance with applause, but gave Jane the silence of expectation. Its lack of stimulation reacted on her sensitive mood,

giving her no encouragement, no feeling of their friendliness, and instead of exhilarating her with a promise of favor, emphasized her desperate uncertainty. In her endeavor to play her best she overshot the mark with strained technique at the expense of spontaneity.

The public that loved Beatrice Drake in ingénue rôles were out of sympathy with her new interpretation. They had come to be amused, but were doomed to listen to philosophy; they had come to laugh and were invited to think. As the first cordiality wore away they became critical, indifferent, unresponsive.

Jane saw strange expressions creep into the faces of her friends. Little smiles of scorn sought answering smiles, eyes met eyes in puzzled inquiry, brows grew wrinkled with disappointment. Then attention began to wander, and they no longer seemed to understand the lines. That was the worst of all.

Jane raised her voice and increased her emphasis, but a sledge-hammer attack is not magnetism, and in Jane's case they served to make her interpretation seem vastly overdone.

Many of Jane's best friends did not remain to witness her humiliation. Some of the critics left before the climax; all immediately after. During the last act the players made a brave effort to rally, but the people who remained were those who sat to the end merely to "get their money's worth."

The final curtain fell at last, and as the weary stragglers left the theater the manager stormed about the stage.

"Burn it! burn it!" he shrieked at Bryce. "It's a failure! We've all failed; everything that we backed it with has gone to smash. I wish to God we could shut up the newspapers."

The scene-shifters struck the scenes in ominous silence; actors and actresses stole away like whipped dogs; the stage doorkeeper was dumb as they passed out; the star crept un-

escorted to her carriage; the leading man went with bowed head; the playwright had fled unnoticed; the manager, mumbling curses, turned out the lights, and silence fell upon the theater.

Bryce was not in their rooms when Jane came in. She had hoped he would be there. She was so wounded, so sick at heart, so desperate, so intolerably lonely! She had tried so hard to win the world's fame, and after all her pains the world had turned its back on her, laughed and left her alone. Even her husband deserted her. Her husband! It was a mockery; she had none. Failure! She had said to Ludwig Darenbeck: "Suppose I should give up everything only to fail; that would kill me." Well, she had failed. New York was laughing at her. Her father's judgment would be vindicated. She could picture Scribner's sneering smile. Bryce would hate her for making a failure of his play. Darenbeck would not despise her, but he would pity her.

She did not want pity. She wanted the world's homage; she needed its flattery, she demanded its respect. And in place of these the world gave its laughter.

She sank into the nearest chair, the one before Bryce's writing-table, and, pressing her hands against her temples, sought to still their throbbing. She closed her eyes, but the darkness served only to intensify her grief and she opened them, staring vaguely down at the manuscript heaped before her.

"More rubbish! More rubbish! How it must hurt him, this failure," she murmured half aloud, and forgetting her own tragedy she began to think of him.

Where was he? Why did he not come? Could he ever know hope again? They had been conceited fools to think they could win a world's approbation — she, a mediocre actress, and he, a deluded scribbler!

What had been gained by the hours of patient effort squandered on the manuscript

before her? Her nervous fingers scattered the loose typewritten pages, and, though her eyes wandered aimlessly over the lines, they caught no meaning. She was weary, she did not care. Why did he not come? He had made her promise not to read the novel until after the opening night. She wondered again vaguely why. Perhaps he had feared its unworthiness would shake her faith in his ability. Her faith was shaken now and she did not care to read it. What did anything matter now? It was cruel of him not to come. Her eyes still rested on the lines on the papers before her.

"She had yellow daisies in her hair," Jane read carelessly; "daisies with great dark centers, that were like her eyes." That was curious, she thought, without heeding the words particularly. Bryce had once compared her own eyes to daisies. She read on.

"Anne was tired that night, and lay back in the arm-chair like a weary child. Does a

woman realize always when a man loves her? If you ask a conventional woman, she will evade the point skillfully; if you question a woman who prides herself on her frankness and modernity, she will say yes. Was it possible that she did not know I loved her? Her frank comradely manner showed no signs of self-consciousness, no slightest indication of so much as a quickened pulse-throb when I was near. Once, indeed, I thought she flushed, but instantly she rose from the table to busy herself with the kettle, and I could not be sure."

"The kettle!" thought Jane. "What kettle?" She remembered very keenly the night they had eaten supper at home, and he had moved the daisies aside so that he might look at her. She had lain back in the big chair afterwards and closed her eyes, too, just as this Anne he was describing had done. Could it possibly be — ? She left the question unformulated and read swiftly on, her face

very grave, but joy dawning behind it like a rosy sunrise breaking between clouds. Bryce could write, and on the paper he had put his heart until she could almost see it beating. This was no cold-blooded, deliberate novel-writing — it was alive, breathing, the voice of a man torn by a great love pent up, a man yearning to touch, to revere, to cherish, to spend on the beloved the long-strangled affection of a rich and powerful nature. And beyond a shadow of a doubt the woman he loved was Jane.

Slowly she drew a blank sheet of paper across the page she read, as if covering something too sacred to be seen. Tears came, hot, burning, to her eyes, and fell from her long, black lashes upon the manuscript above which she bowed her head.

So this was Bryce's secret! Jane's heart went out to him in a sudden flood of tenderness. She must make up to him for the failure of the play; she yearned to comfort him.

He had done everything for her, and she had given nothing in return. She must be everything to him, now that the play had failed. Why did he not come?

The door opened and Bryce came in wearily, tragedy in every line of his face. After all, she thought, it was his play that had failed, even more than her acting. The world was laughing at him more than at her. He felt unutterably alone. Unseeingly he looked at her as she sat frozen, inhibited, at the desk.

"Bryce!" she spoke at last, painfully.

He did not answer, but moved slowly towards her and laid his hands on the pile of manuscript. There was no anger in his action — only the calmness of despair. He had risked his all — and lost. She laid her hands over his with a cry of restraint.

"No, no! Bryce! I 've read it."

He drew away from her.

"I am not fit for anything," he said desperately.

"It 's mine," she said, yearning over him, reaching shy hands up to him. "It 's mine, Bryce; don't you understand? I 've read it; I know."

He looked down at her, a gleam coming into his dull eyes.

"You — mean?"

She put her arms around his neck and drew him down. He knelt at her feet, his head against her breast, her lips softly kissing his hair.

"My dear!" she murmured softly. "My dear, my dear!"

PART THREE

THE ROAD TO ROME

CHAPTER XI

Mr. Carrington left the folded newspaper at his breakfast plate untouched, but he slipped the office copies into his private room, where, between the fear of Jane's failure and the hope of her success, he apprehensively searched the pages. In black and white it stared at him — his daughter had failed.

The world wondered and gossiped, laughed, pitied and forgot; only the family kept on grieving. They were more sensitive than Jane and Bryce, who had life to take up anew and were far too busy with the problem to concern themselves with spilt milk.

Jane wakened in the morning to a sense of calamity. The play had failed, and she had told Bryce she loved him. The emotion that had borne her up overnight was as flat by daylight as stale champagne. No one had ever

been kinder to her than Bryce. She must repay that kindness now, in this hour of need. She must prove herself a good wife.

She lay still and reflected, trying to analyze the situation. Bryce had it in him to succeed — she was certain of that. He would want to teach now, to support them, but she must not let him. She must keep him at the novel he had begun for her, and she would seek another engagement. Somehow they could tide over, and, if they waited, things were sure to come their way. Jane had learned something of the actor's gambling instinct to double the stakes and go on in a losing game. At least there was a certain dignity in suffering poverty for the sake of art.

Jane got out of bed and, quickly dressing, began to get breakfast. Presently Bryce appeared, a very different looking man from the wrecked and ruined creature who had come in from the failure of his hope a few hours before. He swept Jane up in an embrace,

apron, spoon and all, with a boy's eagerness. She came submissively, with lowered lids.

"Do you love me, Jane?"

She put up her mouth silently, an advantage promptly taken by Bryce.

"That 's all I ask of the world," he said joyously. "Nothing makes any difference now. I 'll go out and capture a manager before breakfast, and you shall stew him with onions. Would you prefer one with whiskers or without?"

She was glad of his absurd gayety; she had feared a reaction.

"Without, I think," she decided gravely. "And be sure to see that he is plump. . . . Oh, my coffee 's boiling over!" and with housewifely haste she freed herself from his arms. She was rather glad to be released; it made her shy to have him touch her, vaguely uncomfortable, on the defensive. He followed her and righted the coffee-pot skillfully.

"But you are sure you love me, sweet-

heart?" he repeated, turning up her face to his. "Absolutely-dead-certain-sure? Open your eyes and look at me."

Captured again, Jane blushed and drew away.

"Of course I do — dear," she assured him.

"Very much?"

"Very much."

"Better than all the world?"

Jane pouted playfully.

"Well, we 'll see about that. I won't love you at all if you don't let me get breakfast. . . . No, I won't. . . . I will not. . . . Oh, Bryce — please!"

But Bryce was not to be denied. He had waited for Jane too long, and there was no getting him to be serious for a minute. Breakfast was a kiss-interrupted meal. To watch them, no one would have thought that the night before they had seen the work of months ruined in an hour. Only Jane was sometimes grave, a shadow flitting in her eyes.

But playtime must be short where there is no money in the household purse, and Bryce went to work feverishly. "The Price of Power" went into the dust heap, Beatrice Drake was speedily re-billed in "The Blue Bell" and Jane obtained an ungrateful part in a popular comedy that had been running in New York for many months.

Next to Bryce, the greatest consolation Jane had came in a letter from Ludwig Darenbeck.

"I have heard of the trouble and I think of you much. I know of your life only what I have read and have heard. I read of your marriage and I wish you much happiness. I know that the world has been cold to you, but it will not always be so. Sometimes the world is only a little slow. Some day it will be proud of you. I send my highest respects to you and your husband, and sign myself,

Yours respectfully,

LUDWIG DARENBECK."

His encouragement had its usual impelling force; Jane put the note in her gown, that it might act as a charm for success, and started

out gayly for a morning walk and bit of shopping. As she walked, she reflected on ways and means. Something must be done before long, and she went over all possibilities. There was that other play of Bryce's — "The Fire Opal"; she had liked it better than "The Price of Power"; there was more color and movement in it. Gaston was the man to stage a thing like that, and she wished he could see it. Jane paused in her march. Why not? She was not far from the Gaston Theater. With swift determination she turned that way.

How she was going to obtain a personal interview with Gaston, that mysterious, renowned manager, she did not stop to consider, until the man at the box office asked if she had an appointment.

She was deep in explanation of her place in the profession when another man, who had seen her through the grating, came out into the foyer by way of a cloak room at the side of the office. He was very big, very formi-

dable, Jane thought, and yet courteous, with an English accent that matched his courtesy.

"Do you know Mr. Gaston? Who sent you, may I ask?"

"I came because I must see him. Is he here?"

"I don't know; if you can explain your errand to me, when I see him I might — You wish an engagement?"

"It is about a play."

"Ah, yes. I am Mr. Wells. Perhaps you will tell me about it?"

"When do you think I could see Mr. Gaston?" continued Jane, not unaware of the value of insistence.

"That is difficult to state. Sometimes days pass without my seeing him at all — he comes and goes. He is not well; indeed, the doctors say we must take the very best care of him."

Mr. Wells expatiated quite eloquently upon the doctor's verdict.

"Can you tell me anything about his plans for the next season?"

"He has not acquainted me with them."

"Would he read a play if I sent it to him?"

Mr. Wells welcomed the suggestion with so much alacrity that Jane's suspicions were aroused.

"Ah, yes. That would be the best plan —"

"How long would it take him to read it?"

"That would depend upon his strength. There are, of course, manuscripts ahead of yours."

"If I could only speak to him — for only five minutes! Won't you please go back and see if he is there? I'd be so greatly indebted to you."

Mr. Wells was not unkind and he excused himself, leaving Jane to pace the small square foyer and to gaze an interminable time upon the mosaic frieze of the artistic room until Mr. Wells came back with a noncommittal smile and a graceful air of dismissal.

"Mr. Gaston is not here to-day."

"I 'll wait," said Jane desperately.

"They also told me he did not expect to come at any time to-day," he added blandly.

Jane left, humiliated, and walked three blocks in the wrong direction before she realized she was on the street. Then she upbraided herself for the way she had bungled the interview. Gaston could congratulate himself upon possessing so estimable a body-guard. She must try some other way. That night, still keeping her plan to herself, she mailed a letter to John Gaston, soliciting a five-minute interview. Three days later she received a courteous note from his secretary saying that Mr. Gaston was out of town. She spent two miserable days doubting and believing the excuse and then, unable to endure the uncertainty longer, telephoned to the hotel where she had once learned he lived.

"Out of town," came the answer.

"For how long?"

"Could n't say."

The theater and hotel agreed. Jane began asking questions in the Rialto.

"Does any one ever know where Gaston is?" she inquired of an old actor.

The old man laughed.

"Gaston is a wise owl, and so slippery you can't catch him. Don't pin any of your faith to him."

"Why not?"

"Lord, have n't you heard he 's the best jollier in the country? Promises everything and never keeps a promise."

"I don't believe it!" cried Jane indignantly, for all her life Gaston and his artistic successes had held her admiration.

"Well, all right, then! If you don't believe it, try him and see."

Jane was determined she would. In a few days she telephoned the hotel again. The main office connected her with his apartments.

"Mr. Gaston speaks only by appointment," was the answer.

"I have an appointment," Jane lied.

"He is sleeping. I cannot disturb him."

Jane kept her coolness.

"Thank you, I will call again."

It was nine-thirty in the morning. Jane had been too early; professionals are late risers. Afraid to miss him, however, she dared to call again at ten. The same voice answered.

"Mr. Gaston has just left for the theater."

Could he have dressed and eaten breakfast in half an hour? She allowed him three-quarters more to reach the theater, then tried to get him there.

"Mr. Gaston has not come in yet."

Jane banged up the receiver. Where was Gaston? She must reach him some other way. Another week sped by. Bryce was working out a new idea for a play that was to bring in their ship. Jane hoped it would, but she

was losing her confidence. It was all so hard; it was all such a crazy sort of a honeymoon. She wondered what their love would be like if they had leisure, now they were both working so hard to make provision against actual need.

All the time she was silently concentrating upon her determination to see Gaston, wondering how she could meet him, and suddenly her thoughts crystallized. She recalled having heard the father of a dear girl friend of hers say he had known Gaston in his youth. Might he not aid her? With hope soaring again, Jane sent a pleading letter to Laurence Abbott and waited for an answer.

Laurence Abbott was a man of influence and power. He was devoted to his daughter and most generous to her friends. He was also naturally kind. With a personal letter wishing Jane success, he enclosed a note of introduction to Gaston. Jane mailed it, and the answer was swift.

"My dear Miss South, — Mr. Gaston wishes me to say he will be very happy to see you at his theater at ten forty-five to-morrow night, if that will suit your convenience.

Very truly yours,

Rufus Walker."

Would it be convenient? Jane would have broken an engagement with a king to keep the appointment!

On the great night of the interview she telephoned Bryce, in the second intermission of the play in which she was acting, that he need not come for her as usual, as they had called a rehearsal after the play, and that a member of the company would escort her home. Bryce believed her, and Jane was free to go to the Gaston Theater, where she was met at the door by Mr. Wells, who affably handed her over to another young man, who said he would tell Mr. Gaston of her arrival. A colored boy swung back a carved gold-and-brown gate and ushered her up a narrow staircase leading into darkness. At a turn in the stairs the boy

opened the door of a dark room, switched on the lights, bowed and withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Jane found herself alone in a cozy room above the box office. One low curtained window overlooked the foyer and another looked down upon the paved alley leading to the stage door. Jane had an unpleasant feeling that from some secret place Gaston could see her. She imagined that his eyes were watching her from some concealed spot, and she therefore retained all her dignity, assuming a calmness she did not feel as she took in the details of the room. It was charming. There were brown velvet portières, graceful big chairs, a small chair, a quaint inlaid mahogany writing-table, a larger table, some choice folios and — The knob turned in the door as it opened to Gaston. His white hair loomed out of the darkness of the hall, — his white hair and the stiff white collar of his priest-like coat. He came in, closed the door, and offered Jane his

hand. His manner was so gentle, so diffident, that it surprised away the words of greeting with which she had fortified herself.

"How do you do," he said gently. "And so you are a friend of Mr. Abbott. I am very fond of Mr. Abbott."

He motioned her to be seated. She selected the chair she thought would become her most and he took the smallest one. He was short, but one forgot his size when one looked at his head — a fine, shapely head, with glorious hair that stood up in thick white waves. There were shaggy iron-gray eyebrows, scowling over eyes that might be as soft as velvet or aflame like living coals. They were sleepy-looking that evening, and he lowered his lids often. His lids drooped pathetically and his youthful face was pallid and drawn. He looked, Jane thought, like a very great man wearing out in the fight of life.

"I have waited, oh, so many years, for this opportunity!" she said. "I can hardly

realize I am really talking to the great Gaston."

A rare smile illumined his sensitive lips.

"I am not well to-night — I have been ill. My doctors try to keep me quiet, but I must be around. I can't be quiet."

"It is so hard to get to you!"

"To me?"

"Yes; your staff of men guard you well."

"Am I really so difficult to reach as they tell me?"

"Indeed you are."

"And so you want to become an actress?"

Jane was annoyed. She had written in her letter that she had a play. The fact that Gaston asked the question showed how little attention he had given her letter. Details for the secretary, no doubt — only big issues for Gaston. The interview was given solely on the strength of Abbott's influence.

"I am an actress, and I am anxious for an engagement, it is true; but at present I am

more concerned about a play a — a friend of mine has written."

Because Jane stammered over the fib, Gaston jumped to the conclusion that she was trying to conceal the fact that she had written the play herself.

"Is that it?" he asked, pointing to the four slim blue books she had placed on the table. As he made no move towards them she got up and carried them to him. He fingered them idly, reading the title aloud, as if mentally spelling it: "The Fire Opal."

"The star part is that of a woman who can and does pull the wool over men's eyes until her own misdeeds begin to react upon her," Jane ventured.

"Is it vital? We have to cater to blasé men about town who want their emotions aroused. We must have something that will thrill them."

"I am sure that this will. Oh, Mr. Gaston, it must! You must produce this play. There

are splendid opportunities for your stagecraft, plenty of subtleties for you to bring out. The part of Opal is a tremendous characterization — oh, if I could only play it myself — the part holds such possibilities! For instance, in the first act — there where the Fire Opal first realizes the evil charm her beauty exerts — she is appalled that a man would think of murdering another in order to gain possession of her. Then she begins to trifle with this power. She does it out of curiosity at first, to see what she can do; and then gets so entangled in the affairs she has started that she can no longer extricate herself, but has to go on and on, down, down into the abyss she has created, and the crash, the climax, comes like a peal of thunder. All the evil she has done comes back upon her, the spirits of the people she has harmed crowd around her; she fights off the phantoms, she gropes about her room, talking to the miserable things torturing her; she reviles herself and them. She begs for mercy.

She takes a knife to stab herself and then she stops — like this." Jane was in the center of the room now, her eyes glowing with emotion, her voice ringing with it. She made as if to stab herself with an invisible dagger, an expression of horror lining her face. Her voice rang out dramatically true: "I can't do it — I can't do it!" and she flung away the dagger.

She held the position a second, then dropped it quickly. The swift snapping off of the attitude gave Gaston the effect of a quick curtain following a rapid climax. Her sense of the technical value of time was not lost upon him, nothing was lost upon him; he might close and open his eyes in a way that made one think of a sleepy lion, but he never missed a point.

When she had finished she was a little ashamed of her enthusiasm, half apologized for her acting.

"I could n't help it — I want you to see the possibilities."

"I will look for them," he said, and his dark eyes sought hers intently. "What are you playing now?"

"I have only a small part in 'The Giggling Girl.' It was a bad season for engagements."

"Down the street here at the Victorian?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been on?"

Jane had acquired professional self-assurance.

"About three years — mostly in stock out west — I 'm new in New York."

"I know," said Gaston simply. He meant that he was very well informed about every theatrical move made in New York.

Jane realized again the importance of being with Gaston. She had almost forgotten the value of it when she saw how kind and gentle he was. She became afraid that she had prolonged the interview too long and moved at once to bring it to a close, although he indicated no desire to end it himself. He

seemed quite comfortable, quite talkative, in fact.

"Mr. Abbott will know that I am glad to have met you — I shall write him."

"It was very kind of you to see me, Mr. Gaston. I have always admired your splendid productions. This has been a rare evening in my life. You will read the play?"

"I promise."

"When may I hear from you?"

"I will send you word in a few days."

He opened the door, allowed her to pass out first, put out the lights, closed the door again, and followed her down the narrow winding stairs to the foyer below. The theater was dark, the box office was closed, and only a little light showed the way across the room to the door that opened on the street.

Mr. Wells confronted them. He seemed to come from nowhere, as if by magic, but there he was, tall, broad-shouldered, ready to serve Gaston.

"We have kept you waiting a long time," said Jane in conciliating tones, but Wells smiled denial of any fatigue, and his voice, when addressing Gaston, was gentle and low, eminently faithful.

"I told Craig you wished him to come with us," he said.

CHAPTER XII

Craig! It was the name of one of Gaston's leading men, a man whom Jane had always been curious to meet. She glanced at him intently as she passed him on the stone stoop beneath the portico of the theater. The street-lamp was bright enough to see him clearly. He was standing easily near a pillar smoking a cigarette. There are ways and *ways* of standing, and ways and *ways* of smoking cigarettes. His way was graceful and nonchalant; his attitude was receptive, rather than assertive. He held his cigarette in slim, nervous fingers and placed it presently between sensuous lips. His eyes returned Jane's intent look in a half-interested, half-mockingly, tired way. It was the attitude of a man who knows much about life and wonders if he can find anything of

new interest in it. As Jane reached the sidewalk, Craig joined Gaston and Wells, and the three walked down the street to a restaurant that was one of Gaston's haunts.

Jane walked along in the opposite direction. Reaching Broadway, she celebrated her interview by engaging a hansom to take her home. Her brain was awhirl with great hopes. Gaston ought to take Bryce's play, because there was such a splendid leading part in it for Craig — for Craig's queer, fascinating personality!

It was after midnight when Jane arrived home to find Bryce still writing. He pushed aside his work to help her off with her things, to pet her, as he often did when she came in worn out with rehearsal. To-night he remarked upon her vivacity of manner.

"I was beginning to worry; it was a long rehearsal. Who brought you home?"

"I took a hansom. It has rested me. Oh, Bryce, when you have a successful play how

happy we shall be! I 'm starved. Let 's have a feast and just pretend we have arrived."

Her gayety dispelled for one short night the gloom that hung over them, but the dawn brought back the old fears again. Jane kept her secret to herself bravely, but, as the days passed without word from Gaston, she grew depressed. At length she took to the telephone again, called up the theater and asked for Gaston's secretary.

"Who is it, please?" came the inevitable question.

"Miss South."

"Just a moment."

Jane waited, only to hear that the secretary was not in. No matter what hour of the day she called up, no matter how many times she gave her name, the secretary was never in to Cecelia South.

Jane kept her disappointment in check and tried to smile and go on bravely with each day's work. But the trial was a strain on

her nerves. She could not sleep at night, and she often woke Bryce as she stumbled over a chair on her way in the dark to the window, where she sat looking down into the silent little yards and up at the dark houses silhouetted against the bright city sky, listening to the interminable night noises of New York.

Had Gaston decided not to see her again? Did he not like the play? Was it too "literary," too wordy, perhaps? She recalled that some of the speeches were uncommonly long. It certainly did not deal with any big thought of the hour. Was the construction bad? Perhaps it lacked dramatic action, perhaps the characters were not clearly, strongly drawn. No doubt it was a worthless play.

Bryce worried about her pallor and her increasing fatigue and begged her to stop acting. But she felt that if she did not keep her mind occupied she would go mad with anxiety, and so she forced herself to continue

the routine. A whole month passed, and then she wrote another letter to Gaston. When no answer came she telephoned, after three days, to the secretary.

"Who is it, please?" asked the girl.

"Miss Cecelia South — it is most important." Jane was desperate.

"Hold the wire."

A moment, and a man's voice answered.

"This is Mr. Walker, Miss South." The secretary spoke pleasantly. "Mr. Gaston asked me to tell you that he will be happy to see you at ten forty-five o'clock to-morrow evening at the theater."

"I shall be there," said Jane curtly. She was positive now that the secretary was never in until he had word from Gaston.

Jane went alone again, desperately unhappy, expecting a final dismissal. Again Wells met her at the door, again she was ushered up the little stairs behind the gate, and again she waited in the little room.

She expected Gaston to come in as he had done at their first interview, but this time Wells returned to say that Gaston preferred to speak to Miss South in his private study.

Jane followed Wells down the stairs, out to the street, and through the cool quiet night to a passageway and an elevator that took them up to Gaston's sanctuary. Jane was puzzled by the arrangement of the small rooms they passed through, and made rather nervous by the mysteriousness of everything. However, she calmed herself with the thought that one of the mildest men in the world was waiting to receive her.

The room in which he sat was two stories high. Huge stained-glass windows draped in crimson velvet took up one wall, a mammoth fireplace of ancient tiling part of another, and a winding wooden staircase and picturesque balcony the other two. There were quaint carved chairs about, and queer curios and trophies and works of art and books, and two

writing-tables covered with papers — all in the soft glow of yellow and rose glassed lights, which kept the outlines of the furnishings indistinct.

In the midst of this rich, quiet room sat Gaston, an amber light mellowing his handsome face and his oriental eyes.

Wells waited until the greetings were finished before he withdrew. Then Jane found herself alone opposite the wizard and she trembled for his verdict, not daring to let a question pass her lips, so low was her courage.

Yet he was so kind and fatherly she wanted to take him by the hand and beg him to accept the play. Of course he did not want it, else he would have said at once that he did. Still, she waited for his word.

"You have written a great play," he said.

Jane wilted — everything in her drooped. She sank into her chair; she seemed to grow smaller; she felt herself shriveling into a pitiful little heap. She was weak with joy. Gas-

ton had said it was a great play. Had he condemned it, she would have resented his criticism and fought for its merits. His praise came almost as a blow. It seemed impossible. He must be mistaken. His judgment must be bad. He must be ill, not capable of discrimination. No! He was well, ten times stronger looking than the last time she had seen him. His eyes were brighter, his words came sharply.

"Is it really good?"

"Splendid!"

"Tell me the truth — I came for the truth — what does the play lack?"

"Nothing."

"But its construction is unusual."

"It is clever."

"Is n't the dialogue wordy?"

"No; very much in keeping with the characters. The dialogue is excellent, language good, characterizations excellent, phrasing beautiful."

"There must be something wrong — don't spare me — I beg for the truth — "

Gaston gave her a penetrating, astonished look. "You don't seem to realize," he said, "how big a play you have written. The first act is so simple, so direct, so like the Greek — all suppression and then at last expression. There is a crash; like a cannon-ball it explodes — it is tremendous — a vital, human play! Lines are good, similes easy — you have a wonderful talent."

"It is too much," protested Jane falteringly. "I can't stand it. Tell me there is something wrong with it."

The blood flamed into Gaston's face. All of a sudden he seemed to tower in his chair. His white hair seemed to stand out bushier from his head, his eyes burned. There was the anger of the master in his voice, the master's irritation at contradiction.

"No, no! I would not tell you these things if I did not mean them! There would be no

object, no reason for that. I am too busy. When I saw at the end of one act there, two men say 'good night' and then a woman talking all alone, I thought how can any one with intelligence be so stupid and so dull as to write a soliloquy. I was disgusted. Then I read on, and I saw that it was no soliloquy, that you had a new method — that was clever — smart. Sometimes I can let a thing pass if I see one is discouraged. I could not hurt a fly, but I can do almost anything for results. They say cruel things about me, but I have had my ideals — and keep my promises. We will put this play aside for the Fall."

"A contract?"

"I will send you one."

Jane wanted to throw her arms about him, he had given her so much happiness. Then she felt a sudden fear that he would take issue at the story she had told him.

"Mr. Gaston," she said reluctantly, "I — I did not write that play. I — said I did be-

cause I came to you without my husband's knowledge. My husband wrote that play."

Gaston's lips curved slightly in a very sweet way and his eyes were shining softly as he looked at Jane.

"Yes," he said winningly, "your husband is Bryce Gordon — he has just had a failure with the 'Price of Power.' I watched all that; but there was subtlety even in that play that was not brought out in the acting. I could have made it go. Some day when it has been forgotten we shall rewrite the 'Price of Power.' In the meantime we will shelve it and let it await its opportunity. A play eats no oats. You were a very bad actress in the 'Price of Power.' You deserved to fail. But you were misplaced — you should have been cast for the lead. I will give you the part of the Fire Opal and have Craig play the opposite. It will go."

Jane never remembered how she got out, except that Wells was at the elevator ready

to serve Gaston — Wells, who sprang up mysteriously whenever and wherever Gaston had need of him. Craig was standing on the stoop, smoking, exactly as he had been after her first interview. Craig recognized her — almost smiled.

"He knows who I am," thought Jane, and she fled from Gaston's Theater in joy so deep it was almost pain. She went home to Bryce, threw herself into his arms, and told him.

Bryce was so happy, they were both so happy, that they sat up all night discussing the great good fortune and making plans. Bryce's talent for writing was temporarily paralyzed with joy. He attempted a letter, but its phrasing was telegraphic and childish. He laughingly begged Jane to write it for him, while he kept his arms about her and kissed her hair.

CHAPTER XIII

Advance royalties did not overcrowd the coffers of Gordon & Co., but two good contracts lay signed in a safety deposit box rented especially in their honor, and Bryce, after balancing his bank-book and figuring out what checks were due from the magazines, decreed that Jane needed a month in the country.

Like two children they packed their trunks, gave up their shabby little suite, paid their bills, and departed hand in hand for a farmhouse among the Catskills, where Bryce was a much loved guest, and Jane was welcomed, first for his sake and then for her own, by the good-hearted farmer and his rosy-cheeked wife. Bryce was happy in the thought of being able to give Jane her honeymoon at last. As for her, it was her first introduction to the real country, and she thought of Mrs. Van Muel-

ler's conventional country home with a pitying smile. If she could have seen Walter Scribner wooing Leslie there, she would have felt a throb of pain as well. But Leslie was highly flattered, and since Jane had failed to annex him to the family considered it her duty to do so. The social world envied, praised and congratulated. The Carrington-Scribner alliance was accomplished at last, and Leslie was choosing her bridesmaids when Jane and Bryce were on their way back to New York.

September was still hot in the canyon of Broadway when the theatrical birds began to flock to town again. Stars returned from Europe, old stagers dropped into the managers' offices to exchange gossip, hopeful beginners arrived in dowdy new clothes and shiny shoes, playwrights and costumers held long consultations and worked overtime. Socially, New York was still scattered at resorts and country homes. The great public drifted through Luna and Dreamland. But behind

the scenes the players labored on the endless work of preparation for the night when lights are on and new shows come up to the public's judgment bar to succeed or fail.

With the first red leaf, Jane and Bryce had also returned, strong, sun-browned, eager to throw themselves into their work. Gaston had taken much trouble to choose the cast of ten, so painstaking was he, so determined that every actor and actress should be physically as well as mentally able to portray the character allotted. He left the preliminary readings of the play to the management of Sam Greene, and did not come to the front himself until the lines had been memorized.

Jane thought she had learned what rehearsing meant, but her eyes were opened under the Gaston management. Never before had she worked so enthusiastically or with such joy and comfort. In other productions she had heard cursing, she had had to ignore insults, stifle her resentment, and bow to the

common; had learned along with the others to endure coarseness as something unavoidable. But in the Gaston playhouse there reigned goodfellowship in endeavor, sacrifice of self to the artistic whole, and, above all, a courtesy that Jane had never seen surpassed in a drawing-room. There was an atmosphere of refinement everywhere. In the warmth of it the artistic nature expanded like a flower in the sun. Gaston got the very best out of every person he worked with; he was an inspiration in himself; here in the secret rehearsals at his playhouse he was the much-loved master surrounded by those devoted to him. Here was his castle where he worked out his ideals and fashioned his dreams into form, and they all helped him gladly, faithfully, lovingly.

Wells, Greene and Carpen guarded the theater. They were always going to and fro, running errands, springing up mysteriously when an outsider asked admittance. Gus, the

doorkeeper, guarded the stage entrance; Carpen watched Gaston's health, from time to time bringing him milk. Wells, Greene and Carpen were the keepers of the castle. The opening night was the battle day, the stage the battlefield, the actors were the soldiers, the playwright was — well, the playwright was there in case the chief might care to ask his advice. That was about the proportion of influence each faction held; and yet Bryce was made to understand that, no matter how much Gaston might blue-pencil, how much he might revise, how much he might argue, he, Bryce, was still the playwright, the original creator. That was part of the genius of Gaston. He was no brutal iconoclast, and although he could condemn the bad, he remembered to praise the good; and he always had reverence for the ideals of another.

It was Gaston who taught Bryce what a power the dramatist is, and Bryce had ample opportunity to appreciate his own importance,

because he saw all the rehearsals from the front. He witnessed days of scenery rehearsals, days when the actors did not appear at all, when Jane was nothing, when the scene-shifters, scene painter and property men were the pawns of the hour, bringing into satisfactory form stage sets which Bryce had conceived in his brain. There were windows and doors and couches and certain kinds of pictures he had written about, a sewing-table, a writing-desk with a particular kind of lock, a basket of flowers, chairs fashioned in a certain period, a fountain that played, trees that swayed, a view of distant hills. All these things and a hundred more had to be made, studied and placed. It took weeks of patient labor, for Gaston was a genius in details. Nothing escaped him, not even the fact that the wall paper showed no sign where a picture had been hung before it was taken to a pawn shop. Orders were at once given to make an unfaded spot with a rim of dirt on

the wall to show that the picture had been there.

Then Bryce had asked for twilight in a certain scene. It was so easy to write twilight; it was so difficult to produce it. When he learned how difficult, Bryce marveled at the power of the pen, that one written word could command so many men and so much of their serious attention and time. Twilight was a big word for Gaston. He rehearsed it a very long time. He sat in the dark auditorium next to Bryce, and from there gave his directions in low, courteous tones; the electricians on the stage and up in the wings accepted his orders with an obedience and attention that almost amused Bryce, who had never realized how serious a matter twilight could be. After many hours of toil he was quite satisfied with the shadows that crept slowly on and along the pillars of the old abbey until all vanished under dusk. He was quite ready to go on to something else, but not so Gaston; for him

the shadows were still too sudden, too dark on that column, too light on this. Then he must work out his new idea of a symbol in the play. He would have the twilight creep over a statue of the Virgin, lighting her face and then gently dulling it. That was a precious idea, thought Bryce, watching with bated breath the exquisite coloring as it grew under Gaston's directions. The electricians had difficulties — lights had to be chosen with mathematical exactness; they had to make their calculations and diagrams. It took a morning, that twilight on the Virgin, but when perfection had been reached, Gaston was as delighted as an artist who has completed a masterpiece.

Bryce had written about costumes, too, and along with them there was make-up to be considered; and so on the days allotted to the costume rehearsals Madame Marguerite came to the theater to view her work in the glare of the footlights. Gus let her pass through the stage door; Wells led her across the stage

to the bridge; Greene met her below it and extended his hand to help her down, for the glare of the footlights blinded those on the stage to the lay of the land in the black auditorium. Through the darkness Madame could distinguish the white hair and collar of Gaston. She nodded a greeting and chose a seat near him. One by one the actors appeared on the stage in the order in which they happened to be ready for inspection, walking down center. Craig came first, raising an arm to shade his eyes from the footlights, and looked above it into the dark auditorium, searching for Gaston.

" How 's this, Mr. Gaston? " he asked, showing back, front and side view of his light-gray suit. He walked up stage, stood with folded arms gazing off left, swung on his heels, returned, seated himself in a graceful pose on a couch, remained a second, rose, showed surprise, astonishment, chagrin, anger, determination. Gaston watched the pantomime with

something akin to indifference and dismissed Craig with a slight nod of approval.

"Gray socks," he said.

"Ah, yes, certainly."

Craig had been with Gaston so long he knew what was required of him and he never failed. He was not a great actor — sometimes not even a good actor — but he made a good appearance and was reliable. Gaston knew how much he could expect and asked for no more. Craig had a personality that was a drawing-card.

Others were mere novices in the business of review. They had to be told how to walk about and how to cull from their parts action that would give some clew as to the suitability of their make-up. One well-meaning but common little woman had to be taught how to walk with a long train. It was Jane who was selected to teach her, for there hovered always about Jane the manner of drawing-rooms.

She herself found the examination very try-

ing. The auditorium was like a huge cavern before her, and the footlights full on her face and figure were so glaring that she felt any faults in her make-up would fairly scream. Greene suggested that she change her gown between the third and fourth acts. Gaston answered that no woman who had gone through the climax of the third act would change her gown after it. Jane said she thought a woman might change her gown mechanically, merely yielding sub-consciously to habit. Wells was undecided. The important question was put to the playwright, but the playwright failed them in this weighty problem. He said that no one could ever tell what a woman would do. It was left to Gaston to take the burden of responsibility.

"Madame, will you make another gown, so that it will be ready if we decide to use it?"

Jane interposed. "I am sorry, Mr. Gaston, but if you please, I can't possibly afford another gown. I have three already, sir."

"No matter," came Gaston's quick response; "I will pay for the gown. It is the result we consider, not expense. Make another one, Madame."

Yes, Gaston was very liberal, and the playwright continued to learn how much trouble his pen had caused. He had written "slow curtain" after the first act. The other curtains were left to the decision of the manager, who set aside one day to rehearse them. He made the actors go over their final lines innumerable times, to determine whether the act lost or gained by a slow or a swift curtain, or would be improved by some tempo between. Twenty times the men high in the wings raised and lowered the heavy brown velvet screen. Twenty times it fell too swiftly or too slowly, too jerkily or too loudly; twenty times it was lifted again before Gaston was satisfied. When the day was over and the men had their cues for each curtain and the record of its tempo, Bryce realized how an entire scene, no

matter how beautifully it is written, can be spoiled by an ending that is inharmonious, and he was more than ever convinced that a manager is a very important person.

Scenery, setting, costume, make-up, curtain, lighting, all important adjuncts to the final production, had their rehearsals separately, just as the actors did. Jane came in for a big share of training. It was not unusual for Gaston to take some unknown actress and give her a leading part, if her type suited. It was a usual thing with him to make a success of her, for they said of him that he could make a stick walk. Now Jane was no stick to begin with, and she was very serious; also she was continually inspired by Gaston's ideas, his magnetic presence, his genius, his beautiful playhouse, his delightful atmosphere, the intelligent company. And so she was kept on her mettle, and yet there was something lacking.

"I could not hurt a fly, and yet I can do

anything for results," Gaston had told her once, and for a long time Jane received the kind consideration offered to the fly. But as the rehearsals progressed and the company gradually began to "play up" in vigor and emotion, the time came for Gaston to seek results, and he was not satisfied with those that Jane offered him. There was a scene in the play where she had to make a passionate appeal to her lover not to desert her. Technically she played it well. Her voice rose and fell as Gaston had demanded, her gestures were not strained, there was vitality in the interpretation, and yet — there was something lacking.

"It does n't get over," cried Gaston, raising his usually low-pitched voice, and coming down the aisle of the auditorium with unusual speed. He climbed the bridge with surprising alertness, and confronted Jane on the stage.

"It does n't get over — it 's all in your mind — get it down — down — there."

He pointed to her heart, took her by the

arm and, holding her with a certain rough firmness, crossed the stage with her to the place where the scene began and made her go through it again. He kept her arm all the time, now relaxing his hold, now hurting her in a grip that tried to push her into the passion of the Fire Opal she was to portray.

The rest of the company stood watching, aware that no one could afford to miss a lesson in acting by Gaston. Wells, who was going on an errand, stopped to watch. Craig lounged up stage waiting for his cues, as he was in the scene. In the orchestra seats Greene and Carpen watched, and Gordon suffered, seeing what to him seemed Jane's humiliation. While his practical self told him it was part of the business, his sensitive nature keenly felt the ignominy. He chafed at his own powerlessness to aid her; he wished he had not written the scene; he wished Gaston had not re-written it to make it so much more passionate than it was at first.

"Have you ever been in love?" asked Gaston in despair.

"Why, Mr. Gaston," answered Jane indignantly, "I am married."

The answer brought a queer, puzzled look into Gaston's angry eyes, and Craig suddenly raised his indolent lids to glance at Jane. Surprise and interest were in the lift of his brows, amusement at the corners of his lips.

"Have you never lost a lover?" asked Gaston shortly. "Don't you know how it feels; can't you imagine? Feel it — feel it — let yourself go — "

"I am letting myself go."

"More than that — more! Your emotion must be like a big wave of the sea, gaining force and more force, until finally, overburdened with it, it crashes on the beach like that — then just before the curtain, the hush as of dead souls."

Just what connection there was between a wave and dead souls and the play no one ever

knew, but it made one understand the thing for which Gaston was working.

As he spared nothing for results, the company began to be embarrassed at the publicity of the lesson. Gordon kept his seat only by force of will, daring neither to interfere nor go out.

"Madame, have you never had a lover?" cried Gaston in the heat of his excitement. Craig looked at Jane intently, wondering what she would answer. Gaston expected no response and was continuing his exhortation when Jane changed it all by bursting into tears.

In a second Gaston was the gentle manager again. With the tenderness of a woman he slipped his hand under her elbow and led her to a chair.

"All right, all right," he said kindly; "it was a good scene — it will be better to-morrow — you are getting it."

With that he pulled a silver quarter from

his pocket and slipped it into the palm of her hand.

Gaston always had a pocketful of quarters, as rewards for work well done. Invariably they were accepted with a smile and an appreciative, "Thank you, Mr. Gaston." A silver quarter had often bridged a moment of tension; it never failed to turn the tide, and to-day was no exception.

Jane had to smile, and the smile struggling through her tears produced a little hysterical laugh.

"Thank you, Mr. Gaston; you are very kind."

"That 's enough of that for to-day," he said, turning to Greene. "Put on the fourth act!"

As she sat resting in the wings, Craig approached her listlessly.

"The Governor won't give up till he gets what he wants," he remarked casually. "You 'll have to go through the same thing

day after day till he 's satisfied. When you plead with me there, get some fire into your eyes, something of the real stuff, you know."

"I thought I did."

"It 's not enough."

"I don't see how I can do much more."

"Perhaps you 've never cared a lot about some fellow?"

"Why, yes, of course I have."

"If you have n't — I wonder why they failed to make you care. If I cared a lot about a woman, I 'd see that she returned it. I 'd make her like me."

Craig's tone was not personal. Jane could not resent the remark without seeming foolish, and yet if he had not meant her, what was the point of it?

She looked at Craig more sharply, her curiosity aroused.

"I had no idea you were a man of such determination."

"Determination? Not at all. A woman

likes a man because he likes her. A man can win any woman he wants if he persists long enough."

"Nevertheless, I have seen rejected men."

"Certainly; the man who won did so by virtue of his greater magnetism, that 's all."

"That 's a strange philosophy."

"Oh, it 's true enough. Have n't you seen a woman throw over a splendid, big, handsome, straight sort of a fellow for a rake?"

"Ye-es —"

"There you have it; the rake, having no scruples, stopped at nothing until he had won."

"That puts love on a very low basis."

"Love!" Craig laughed. "It 's the most wonderful thing in the world — it 's the only thing that really counts. When I am not in love I am the most miserable creature in the world! How can we help loving you beautiful women? Why should we not demand that you love us in return?"

Jane got up, not because she was rested,

but because she could find no ready answer. She had a sense of embarrassment and a desire to avoid his brown eyes. Somehow his silence seemed to demand an answer from her. She could think of no escape except by way of the rehearsal, and she rose.

"I have to go — it 's getting near my cue."

He remained standing where she had left him, his attitude, as always, nonchalant.

CHAPTER XIV

"The Fire Opal!"

It blazed at last in flashing electric letters above the low, graceful portico of the Gaston Theater. The last touch had been given to the costumes, the last rehearsal was over, the scenery and lighting had been tested for the last time, the playwright had put his last penciled correction into the prompt-book. Gaston, himself, had no more to do, but must take his hands off the play and be content with a God-speed. It was the hour when the actor's real work began, the hour when the play must face the public, must stand or fall.

Half-past eight. The ushers were slamming down the seats, and passing a flutter of programs. Women with bare shoulders and rustling skirts were filling the aisles and crowding

the foyer, men in evening clothes struck sharp notes of black and white amid the delicate dresses. The air was exotic with the odor of perfumes and cigarettes, the lights glittered like strings of topazes. It was a Gaston first-night, a night of expectancy, a night when *blasé* theater-goers pricked up their ears and waited for the thrill he always gave them, a night of charm, of magic, of eagerly awaited surprise.

The synopsis in the program was brief, tantalizing. The name of the playwright meant little. "Bryce Gordon?" said the critics. "Bryce Gordon? H'm — did n't he have something to do with 'The Price of Power'? Funny Gaston should take him up. Still, Gaston generally knows what he 's about." They settled back in their seats to see what should befall.

A distinguished looking woman entered one of the boxes, followed by a young girl and two men.

"We never thought we should see you again, Miss Van Mueller," one was saying. "We expected you and Jane Carrington to marry noblemen."

"Well, you see I tried to, but mother and I could never agree, so we compromised by coming back."

"And giving the rest of us a chance. Is n't it queer we should be coming to see Jane this way?"

Mrs. Van Mueller, who had been leveling her jeweled lorgnette at the audience, suddenly joined the conversation.

"I have decided that every girl must work out her own salvation. There was a time when I disapproved of Jane's ambitions. I had other plans for her, but after all I may have been wrong. Of course we did not realize she had such real talent."

"Mother, don't you think we might send in a note to Jane, asking if she will visit us in our box during one of the intermissions?"

Margaret was enthusiastic. "I 'd so love to talk to her again."

"I have sent her a bouquet. It did n't occur to me that we might meet her."

"Oh, we must! . . . Harold, have you a pencil?"

Harold produced a pencil, but as no one in the box had paper to offer Margaret took her handkerchief, a small square with a wide border of duchess lace, and scribbled a few lines upon it. Then she gave it to an usher for delivery and waited with all the eagerness of a school-girl for the leading woman's reply.

Behind the rich and heavy folds of the brown velvet curtain there was excitement, too. The stage was set. The electrician stood at his switchboard in the wings, his hands shaking as he touched the different buttons to assure himself that they were all in working order. The wardrobe mistress anxiously hovered near, eagerly scanning the costumes

for flaws she knew could not be there. Three members of the cast stood in a group, pretending to be interested in conversation. Their eyes roved about restlessly, and every now and then one moistened her lips nervously. Two actors were chewing gum. The "heavy man" sat down on a bench as if to rest, but he soon rose and walked back and forth, biting savagely at his thumb-nail. The "juvenile" actress tapped her foot on the ground and stared before her. The villain wandered back and forth across the stage with an air of bravado in the way he carried himself, but his eyes showed fear.

Bryce Gordon was in a dark corner pressing his hands against his throbbing temples. The stage manager walked about aimlessly, talking excitedly, scarcely knowing what he was saying. Everybody was ready, waiting for the leading woman.

Jane sat in her dressing-room, weak and trembling, suffering all the queer agonies of

stage fright. The room was pungent with the odor of grease paint and flowers that lay knee deep in the corners. Jane cared nothing for flowers now; all she knew was that beyond the curtain was a critical, expectant audience, that to-night she would lose or win.

Gaston bent over her, one hand on her shoulder, — a hand cold as her own, — and held a glass of water to her lips, for she was trembling too much to manage the tumbler.

"I can't think," she whispered harshly. "I can't remember my lines, I can't talk, I can't hear my own voice."

"Steady, now," said Gaston gently. "You aren't the first actress that ever had a first-night."

"Miss Carrington!" cried the call boy insistently for the tenth time. "Eight forty-five!"

"What!" Gaston leaped forward. He had not realized how time had flown. "Ring up the curtain!"

"Oh, I can't!" Jane fell forward, her head on her lap, her hands almost touching the toes of her green satin slippers. The opalescent chiffons veiling the flame color of the Fire Opal's costume crushed against her opal-studded girdle, and trailed in ripples about her to the floor. Gaston grasped her by the shoulder and shook her roughly.

"Get up!" he stormed. "Get up! If you fail, I 'll never give you another chance. They are waiting for you. Come!" He dragged her to her feet and drew her, stumbling, to the wings. The curtain was rising slowly. The audience watched it eagerly, as if feeling vaguely its weight in terms of human destiny. Gaston stood in her way, so she did not see the gap which, like the yawning mouth of a cavern, brought the real and the unreal world face to face, but she heard the voices of the actors. She clung to Gaston, shifting from one foot to the other as each in turn trembled too violently to support her.

"My mouth 's dry as ashes — I can't remember my lines. What do I say first?"

"'Farewell, Tino, I shall see you, then, again to-morrow.' Then you raise the geraniums to your lips as you stand up-stage and face the house."

"Oh, yes, yes, I remember; but I shall forget it in a moment."

"You dare not fail! I have encouraged you enough. I tell you there is no doubt of your success, but you 've got to play up or I 'm done with you. Do you hear what I 'm saying to you? Everything depends upon you, — my reputation, Gordon's and yours. If you fail, if you don't play with all that 's in you to-night, I 'm done with you. Do you hear?"

Then, quickly, "There 's your cue, now go!"

He pushed her forward. She was to enter slowly, walking backward, as if gazing after her lover, whom she was supposed to have left in the garden off stage. Gaston had pushed her energetically and she walked for a short

distance without effort, but, from that moment on, it seemed ages before she reached the stage. Gaston applauded her silently from the wings, and though her voice was weak, she called out to him: "Farewell, Tino, I will see you, then, again to-morrow!"

She was on the stage.

She felt the glare of the footlights, the presence of a house full of human beings; she smelt the scent of American Beauties as it mingled strangely with the must of the stage.

"Come early!"

Her voice was soft, languishing, full of bashful coquetry. She waited, looking off stage, and then turning towards the audience raised the mass of geraniums to her lips. In recognition the house echoed with a greeting of applause which made Jane draw a quick, exultant breath. She smiled. She had received the stimulus she needed. Suddenly she knew that she loved the blotched trees, the coarse, painted sky, the feel of the make-up

on her face. A little spirit cried ecstatically within her. Her brain cleared like mist under a cold wind and divided into two distinct entities. One was the character of the Fire Opal, the other Jane herself, watching from a height a woman in veiled flame-color upon a little stage. Subconsciously she was testing the character of her audience, studying how to reach their sympathy, and unconsciously she did effective business that had not been prearranged. The weeks of varied experience on the road, the hours and hours of study and rehearsal, were bringing their reward, and tonight she was playing as if she were born to the part.

After the climax, in answer to the storms of deafening applause that shook the house, the curtain rose again and again. Gaston was counting the times from the wings. The company filed out to take the curtains, until at length came the cries for "Gaston! Gaston! Gaston!"

And Gaston came. The cries ended in shouts of joy at sight of his handsome face, and then the house was hushed to listen.

Falteringly, timidly, kindly, he said a few low-voiced words. "I cannot talk to you, I never do," he told them. "I can only thank you for your enthusiasm and appreciation of our work. I thank you for myself and company and this young woman who has worked so faithfully — Miss Carrington."

Gaston stepped to the wings and led Jane out. He escorted her to the center of the stage and then left her standing there alone. There was an expectant silence. Jane stood as if undecided whether to fly or remain. By the nervous clasping and unclasping of her hands it was evident to all that she was struggling for self-control. Then, as the tears rolled down her cheeks, she gave a stifled, plaintive, child-like "Thank you" and fled to the wings, sobbing at the triumph, which was greater than she had ever dreamed it could

be. Only then did the audience think of the author and call for him. But authors are often cowards on opening nights and cannot be found. Bryce had disappeared.

"Twenty-two curtains after the climax," said the critics, as they congregated in the foyer during the following intermission. "It 's one of Gaston's usual successes."

"I must see Jane at once," exclaimed Mrs. Van Mueller, wiping real tears from her eyes; "I must see her at once."

But though Mrs. Van Mueller had power in the social world, she learned that the theatrical one was not to be ruled by it. Jane was queen of the theater that night and in no mood to recall a different life. She returned word that she was very sorry she could not see Mrs. Van Mueller and her party, but would be pleased to have them take tea with her at her hotel the following afternoon.

Mrs. Van Mueller was shocked by the an-

swer. She had never dreamed that any court could be closed to her. Jane's growing reputation and evidently brilliant future, as well as her present success, piqued the older woman's pride. She decided to accept the invitation to tea, and make Jane promise that she would be her guest of honor when she played in Chicago. Mrs. Van Mueller could not say that she liked actresses in general, but a coming star! — well, that was different.

"Where is my husband?" Jane was asking behind the scenes.

Craig shrugged his shoulders with a laugh. "Oh, he's only the author, you know."

Jane flared a bit. "This is no time for a jest."

Craig muttered something.

"Stop swearing, Craig, and please find my husband."

"I have no desire to find your husband, madam," he answered significantly.

"The success is making you silly, Craig."

"Is it? They gave me three curtains all to myself — that's something to boast about to my wife."

"I didn't know you were married."

"Of course I'm married. She was in the fifth row."

"Please get my husband."

"And give me — "

With one quick step Craig was close to Jane, who was leaning against the open door of her dressing-room. She made a hasty movement away, but the warning had not come in time. His lips slipped along her cheek. She glared at him, resentment leaping into her eyes; she wanted to speak but could form no words. He took her silence flatteringly.

"Now I'll get your husband," he said pleasantly.

Then she began to tremble and grow weak, and wonderingly questioned her strange agitation. She watched his loose, graceful figure going away, then she slowly, thoughtfully,

closed her door, and in the looking-glass faced her maid. She started.

"Ah — Marie!"

Marie had been a stage maid for many years; she merely smiled.

It worried Jane the rest of the night that she could not summon more resentment against Craig; that she could not dislike him. She wondered what Bryce would think about it, but she did not ask him.

As to Bryce, he had taken one look at the crowded house that always greeted Gaston, and then had dashed out to a rival attraction down the street. It ended before "The Fire Opal," and he walked about the block until he saw a parti-colored stream of humanity pour out of the Gaston Theater. Then he thrust into the current, straining his ears to catch scraps of comment about his play.

The whole thing seemed so unreal, so impossible, that even now he could hardly believe it true. "The Fire Opal" had been in manu-

script three years — long before he had begun the work on his novel — and during that time it had been hawked about New York without avail. Jane's sudden inspiration, Gaston's acceptance, the evolution under his hands, the very sign above the portico, seemed to Bryce like a dream from which he would presently pinch himself awake. He listened to the voices about him.

"Queer, unusual play. Did you notice who wrote it?" asked a clever-faced woman in a black-and-gold evening wrap.

"No, I don't remember. I left my program in the box. Will you join us at Rector's?"

Bryce smiled ironically. Who had heard of him, a playwright? Who was there who had not heard of Rector's?

The carriage caller blocked his way.

"Drive up there! Two seventy-eight! No, your man has n't come yet. Two sixty-two!"

The women waiting looked back at the throng. "My, what a house!" one of them

exclaimed. " Gaston always has brilliant opening nights, has n't he? Was n't it funny they could n't find the author? "

Ah, then they had asked for him!

" How did you like the play, my son? " asked a white-haired man with a wise and kindly face.

" I do not know, father; I am thinking," answered the serious-eyed young man he had addressed.

" That is well, my boy. It 's a great play."

Then Bryce had courage to go in and face Gaston. He knew now that in the eyes of the world he had redeemed himself.

CHAPTER XV

"The Fire Opal" could have run a season in New York, but rival organizations were interfering with Gaston's bookings, and he had to make room for other attractions in the Gaston Theater by sending "The Fire Opal" company on the road.

Jane and Bryce held a consultation in her dressing-room after the last New York performance. It was beyond question that Jane must go with the company. There was no one else who could play the part of the erratic, vivid creature who called herself "The Fire Opal," and gave the play its name. She was at the beginning of her fame now, and it would be folly for her to remain in New York. It was not to be questioned that Jane must go, and neither she nor Bryce hesitated for an instant.

But Bryce was another affair, and he debated a long time before he made up his mind to leave her. Jane had grown dearer to him with every day. Yet with "The Fire Opal" he had made his first big success, and now, while it was fresh in the minds of the public, was the time to follow it up.

A famous publishing-house, in whose files a manuscript of his had lain neglected for months, was featuring it as "the great American novel, by Bryce Gordon, author of 'The Fire Opal.'" There were photographs and articles about him in the magazines; in one of the yellower journals he had "made the first page." Influential people suddenly remembered his existence and introduced him to other influentials. He had an idea for a new play which he needed to work out in quiet, — a quiet that traveling with "The Fire Opal" company could not possibly give him. Jane declared firmly that he must stay in New York.

"I should never forgive myself for being

so selfish," she protested. "Of course I shall miss you dreadfully, but you simply must stay."

"Will you miss me so much, I wonder, Jane?" Bryce asked almost wistfully. "You live more and more in the theater every day."

She looked at him reproachfully out of big, dark eyes, and put up her mouth for a kiss. The argument was unanswerable, and Bryce accepted it.

Many times he kissed her before that day of good-by when the company moved out of New York. It would be at least six months before he could possibly see her again.

Jane rolled freedom under her tongue with zest. Her position of leading woman gave her professional prestige, her beauty and charm won her friends everywhere. All the energy she had once wasted in bizarre behavior was now expended in her playing. Her performances varied temperamentally, but her work was always conscientious and earnest. And, as Bryce had said, she grew daily more ab-

sorbed in her part and her development of herself. For days together she did not think of her family, and hardly remembered Bryce. She worked eagerly, polishing here, discarding there, training herself wherever she thought she was weak. The magic of the theater enthralled her; what happened outside its little sphere was as remote and uninteresting as what happened on Mars. Jane was an actress at last.

She looked the part as she sat in her dressing-room after a Christmas matinée in San Francisco. Outside the day was cold and raw, with a fog that swept in from the sea, but Jane seemed like an exotic as she leaned back on the couch, book in hand, a delicate chiffon negligée flung about her, and her make-up still on. The matinée had begun late, not to interfere with roast turkeys, and the evening performance was only an hour or two away. It was not worth while to go to her hotel.

Yet Jane almost wished she had done so, merely to see people moving about the corridors. She could not concentrate on her book, and threw it down. After all, why should she be alone here on the greatest day in the year? She missed the Christmas turkey, the Christmas celebration, that was a matter of tradition in the Carrington household, the shower of gifts, the gayety she had always associated with the holiday. True, the public had paid her homage, and her dressing-room was full of notes and flowers, but she wanted something warmer and deeper than sympathy from across the footlights. Of course she could not have accepted any invitations if they had been given, but it would have pleased her to have been asked. She was tired of hotels; if she could have had only one day of home life, Jane thought, she would be happy. She began to dream of the time when she could build a home for herself and Bryce.

Of course, for Bryce, too; she was not for-

getting him. Of all the messages she had received, the only ones she cherished were those from Bryce and Gaston. But he was so far away, and she had so many other interests, that she was learning to live without him. His frequent letters about his own work were beginning to bore her, and she found it more and more difficult to answer them. She startled herself by wondering if after all their love had been the mere result of propinquity. Then she reproved herself for the thought. Of course she loved Bryce; but just now it seemed only natural that her main interests should be her part, the number of curtain calls she won, the articles in the newspapers about her, the devotion of the company.

Restlessly she rose and paced her narrow room. For three hours she had been playing with emotions, and she was unnerved, tired, but sleepless, mentally weary and emotionally disturbed. She wanted companionship, the more sympathetic the better. It was not

strange, she reflected, that women go under, forced into an unnatural solitude by the life of the theater. There were occasions in every actress' life when the endurance of solitude must become a battle. It was not so much to the discredit of those who lost as it was to the supreme credit of those who won, the very nature of the profession made the odds so great.

She had got quite muddled in her philosophy when a familiar knock came on her door. She darted to her mirror for a quick look, her heart fluttering, and her voice quivering, as she called "Come."

Craig entered.

"Catch!" he exclaimed, and Jane had scarcely time to screen her face from the shower of American Beauties that fell about her. They clung to her hair and her white chiffon gown, petals scattering everywhere.

Craig laughed as she stooped to gather the roses.

"Leave them," he said; "it makes a picture. Leave them on your dress, too. Let them tear it if they insist. Humor me this Christmas Day."

"Indeed I will," she replied, smiling wonderfully as she raised to her lips the few she had caught with her hands.

Craig leaned over to breathe their fragrance, covering her hands with his. She did not draw away; why should she? He held her like that in a scene in the play. There was no difference except that just then his touch quickened her pulse.

"It was dear of you," she murmured.

He dug the thorns of a rose into the chiffon of her throat, and stood as if fascinated, watching the red petals palpitate with the uneven rise and fall of her breath.

"Wonderful woman!" he said. His voice was low.

Jane instinctively raised a hand to her neck, as if to shield it from his gaze.

He closed his eyes a second and then looked away with something of a scowl, as if he were trying to drive out some unwelcome thought.

"It 's mean out," he remarked irrelevantly, swinging himself gracefully upon her costume trunk and picking up a cup of tea from a tray beside him.

"Don't take that." Jane hurried to prevent him. "It 's cold."

Craig shrugged his shoulders. "No matter. It is enough that it is your cup."

"What a flatterer you are, Craig," she said, trying to laugh.

"Come now, Jane," — there was pleasant raillery in his tone, — "don't tell me you don't know how splendid you are."

"Yes, I must be — at close range — like this," she answered, indicating her long black lashes heavily beaded and her carmined lips.

He dismissed her remark.

"Too used to it to notice. It was wise of you to make it do for both shows. Wish I had. Sit down, or I shall have to get up."

"Oh!" Jane dropped upon the couch. "I forgot I was standing. I'm a bit upset."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know — homesick perhaps — bored with myself — restless, lonely."

"I knew you'd be — that's why I came back."

Her eyes thanked him.

"You are very kind, Craig."

"Oh no, just selfish. It's a queer life at best; gets on your nerves, too."

"I suppose so. The one-night stands were awful. But I've never felt quite like this before. It's as if a fever were consuming me."

Craig looked at her thoughtfully. "It's what I call the fever of the theater," he said slowly; "it's a ruinous thing."

"Would n't you think, though," continued

Jane plaintively, "that some friend in San Francisco would share a home with me to-day? Some of the girls in this town have even been my house guests."

Craig shook his head. He had a charming, debonair way of dismissing unpleasant thoughts.

"Their very exclusiveness is acknowledgment of your success," he answered. "Fame increases the adulation of the crowd and decreases the familiarity of the few. Every rung you climb on the ladder separates you just that much more from your friends. You don't feel differently towards them; you love them just as you did before. It is they who draw away from you, it is they who raise the barriers. The greatest men are the simplest, and yet, where there is greatness there is always loneliness."

"But I am not great," denied Jane modestly. "I am only trying."

"No matter. Take my word for it, the man

at the top is lonely. He won't always admit it — but he is."

"There is something sweet," said Jane reflectively, "in realizing that the highest man has a vulnerable spot somewhere. It seems to humanize even the greatest."

Craig rose from the trunk and went to take the chair before her dressing-table.

"We're all sensitive when it is a question of ourselves," he said. "I've known that so long, I suppose that's why I've never feared any one. I've always been able to see the other fellow as he sees himself. When you do that you stop condemning and just forgive, and that makes you a good mixer."

"Is that a kind way of scolding me for giving you all my time and attention instead of dividing it among the company?"

Craig stared absently at the rabbit's foot with which he was toying while he hesitated to choose the words he wished.

"It is n't that your companionship does n't

mean a great deal to me," he said with some difficulty. "That 's just it. I can't help showing how I treasure it, and they 've remarked upon it; they discuss you."

Jane flared. "How dare they?"

"That 's what I meant," he continued slowly. "You see we are together on the trains, we both go to the best hotel, we dine together, — all that, — and you see I — well, the truth is, Jane, they just know me better than you do."

Jane felt a swift stab of pain and then she straightened defiantly.

"I know you as well as any of them. I recognize in you a man of the world who has the manners of the gentlemen I have been used to meeting. I recognized the stamp of breeding the first time I saw you. Of course I knew — there are stories about your — about you. But even if I had n't known, your manner would have told me. You understand women very well, Craig."

Craig lowered his eyes and his nervous

fingers played among the confusion of things on the table.

"We are thrown with a great many people in this business," he said vaguely, "and one is inclined to become a cynic as well as a sentimentalist."

"I don't understand that paradox," said Jane, puzzled. "If a man has sentiment for a woman, how can he be a cynic about it? I am sure I could n't."

"You are young — in the profession," he said briefly. "You 'll learn a lot of things in the next ten years."

Jane thought of Kate's haggard face, and sighed.

"I don't want to become hardened," she protested.

"You never will; you 're not made like that. You are going to suffer a great deal, — you have so much capacity for it, — but when you finally strike the big thing, it 's going to glorify you. Some women are like that."

"What — do you mean," Jane dared to ask, "by the big thing?"

"Love," said Craig.

"There is Bryce," she suggested.

"Passion," corrected Craig.

"Ah!" Jane rose, half stifling her exclamation. Then she made a brave effort to make up for her hesitation.

"Bryce has been everything to me — like a mother — a father — "

"I know it," he cut her off. "I saw it from the start. It 's his style."

"You are speaking in riddles," she complained, less interested now.

"Am I?"

"Yes, you are. How you irritate me when you elude answering!"

Craig glanced at her keenly, and his eyes suddenly glowed.

"How you could love!" he flashed. "Every night in the play when I hold you there in my arms I feel it."

"In the play!" exclaimed Jane. "You can feel — you can think? I am always too busy with my part to feel anything else."

"So I have discovered. You positively withdraw into your brain."

"And you — you feel?"

"Well," Craig assumed a nonchalant tone, "I 've managed to come along with the company without getting my notice."

Jane was more upset by his flippancy than by his frankness.

"I 'm angry with you, Craig."

He laughed. "You look it."

"Now I am angrier still."

"You don't look it."

Jane felt weak. There was something intoxicating in this fencing, and the look in his eyes. With difficulty she continued, "After all — it is work I need, more work, more work. I wish it were time for the performance."

"I 'm glad it is n't." Craig was throwing discretion to the winds. "I say, you are in

a ripping mood, Jane." He stood up to face her. "I don't know whether to believe you are acting Opal or not. You are getting better fire into her every day. I've written Gaston how well the climax is going. You are beginning to interpret it now as if you had really once lost a lover — or had found one," he added, watching her narrowly.

Jane sank back on the couch, a quiver running through her.

"I give it up," she said, closing her eyes.

Craig came over to her and put his arms tenderly about her. He did it that way in the play to comfort her — why not now? It gave her infinite solace to lean her head against his shoulder, to touch him, to feel his breath on her forehead. She was lonely, she told herself, and wanted a man's devotion.

His lips touched her temple to feel if it throbbed, and then crept softly along her cheek to her lips, leaving a sensitive, vibrating path

behind them. Their contact was like the completion of an electrical circuit — Craig knew that for every bounding pulse, every thrilling nerve in him, Jane now had its mate in her. A few minutes earlier he had asked himself if he could win her, calculating cool chances from the flicker of her eyes and the quality of her voice; but with that gliding kiss, that ended in the red flower of her mouth, thought stopped, and he deliberately let himself go in a delicious confusion of the senses. Sex was an art with Craig.

As for Jane, she did not resist; she did not wish to try. She thought of Bryce, and made an instinctive little movement to release herself; but it was half-hearted, and Craig drew her closer again. With a sigh she let herself drift, and out of her consciousness ebbed all thought except the wonderful, vivid idea that she had just been waiting for him, that never had she felt for any one what she felt for Craig. With closed eyes she lay still. Her

lips kissed under his kisses. The world was encompassed in his clasping arms.

Craig knew when to be gentle, but he also knew when to insist.

"Tell me you love me," he cried, suddenly crushing her and the roses fiercely in his arms.

"I do, I do," she gasped, her clasp tightening about his neck, her lips pressed closer to his. "You are too strong for me — say you love me, too."

There was a rush of emotion, and the tremendous moment of their association, the swift rise to the culminating point of their intimacy, hedged in a flash about them.

"I want you!" he muttered.

Jane turned her face away from his seeking lips, vaguely repelled, and opened her eyes again on the world. The naked soul of the man stood out in his face now, and suddenly every fiber in Jane stiffened to resistance. The good impulses of a lifetime had built a foundation able to stand the test. For an instant

there was a rebellious protest from the woman who had been swept off her feet, followed by a laugh of scorn from the artist.

"What a scene to act!" cried the artist wildly.

Craig recoiled, livid as if struck. He had lost. It was over.

. . . . . .

Later, when the maid returned, she found Jane alone on her knees before the couch, sobbing, suffering, praying. There were crushed rose-leaves on the floor.

"Madame — crying?" exclaimed Marie in concern as she went to help Jane arise. "Ah, dommage. The make-up is ruined. I am late; only fifteen minutes before the overture."

"Go away!" cried Jane in anguish. "Leave me alone."

"Madame must play," replied Marie inexorably; she had been a stage maid a long time.

Jane let herself be dragged to the dressing-

table. She could not meet her own eyes in the mirror; it took one supreme effort after another to finish her costuming.

"Yes," Jane kept repeating desperately, "I must play — I must!"

CHAPTER XVI

Jane and Craig stood in the wings together, waiting for their cue, poignantly conscious of each other's nearness. They did not speak, but each knew what the other knew and what the other felt, and both were shaken by the knowledge.

At least, Jane thought she knew what Craig felt, although he hardly knew himself. There were too many people inside Craig's skin for his own comfort, and some one of them was always likely to pop up unexpectedly and overset the plans of the rest. He wanted Jane; but more than that, he was curious to see the workings of her mind, and what she would do under stress. He watched her now, covertly. Evidently he had got down to her depths. His conclusion was quite right. Stage fright had never held the torture of this pres-

ent mingling of moral fear and professional nervousness. How would the public take their acting, Jane wondered. How could she manage her part? How could they go through the agony of meeting in the story of the play?

The performance was the first failure in the history of "The Fire Opal." Jane held Craig at arm's length in desperation. Their scenes were matter-of-fact, repressed, without human appeal. Applause after the climax was only courteous, in contrast to the enthusiastic appreciation they had received ever since the opening. The road manager, bewildered and dismayed beyond gentlemanly words, flew at Craig, stormed at Jane, pleaded, cajoled, and called a rehearsal for the next morning. The company, amazed, whispered in corners, and cast sidelong looks at the two.

Craig took in the situation with an amused smile, and coolly going to Jane's dressing-room, knocked on the door. Marie opened it,

smiled at Craig shrewdly, and went out as he came in. Jane looked up from her dressing-table, and involuntarily shrank away.

"Craig! Don't!" she said.

"Hush!" he warned quickly. "I 'm not coming to do any passionate pleading, I know there's no use. I want you to look at this."

It was a slip of yellow paper that he held out. Jane stared at it, and then at him. The curiosity of Eve got the better of her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Read," answered Craig, handing it to her. It was a telegraph form, addressed to Bryce.

"'Come to me. I need you. Jane.'" — she read under her breath. "You were going to send this? Oh, Craig!"

He smiled a little, and lighted his inevitable cigarette, with a look of asking permission, which she as tacitly granted.

"Come!" he said, with a whiff. "I 'm not

such a devil, with horns, hoofs and tail, as you seem to think. After all, I 'm only human, Jane. Grant me a little decency."

"You were going to send it!" she repeated. "*Were* you?"

He nodded. "If you like."

She looked at him, not quite sure, and then, suddenly piqued, she said, "You seem to find it easy."

He bent forward with a sudden swift litheness like a striking snake, and his eyes fastened intensely upon hers.

"Easy!" he said, a grating note in his voice. "Be careful, Jane."

Once he showed signs of advance, she was instantly on the defensive again. She did not want Bryce to receive any such wire. It would be much better to tell him; and then, besides, there was — well, there was all the worry it would involve for him. Besides, too, Bryce was probably busy, and could not get away, she said to herself. One thing was sure, she

did not, right or wrong, reasonably or unreasonably, want Bryce arriving on the scene with things as they were at present, and she did not stop to analyze any further. She laid down the property dagger with which she had been playing and turned directly on Craig.

"It 's fine of you to think of it," she began; "it 's like the Craig I know, and I shall never forget it. But — you must n't misunderstand me when I say that I don't think it had better go."

Craig made no move, but watched her keenly. It was like a woman, he thought, to keep still in a case of this kind. Was that what Jane meant to do? Was there perhaps a chance of her changing her mind?

She shook her head as if in answer to a direct question.

"I knew you would misunderstand," she said wearily. "There 's nothing in it for you, Craig. I 'll have to stand up and tell all about

this, and I don't want anything more to tell than has happened already. But, although I appreciate your thinking of it, and being courageous enough to do it, I 'd rather make my confession in my own way. Now, you had better go."

For an instant he hesitated. Then, " Good night, Jane," he said, and went.

In the wings the following night, they again waited for their cues. The emotional scene of the play was just over, and both still vividly felt the touch of the other.

" May I talk to you for one moment, alone? " asked Craig in a low tone.

Jane raised her eyes, not to his, only to his lower lids, as she did when she was supposed to be looking at him in the play. Then her black eyelashes lowered, taking in the rest of his face before she closed her eyes, as if to shut him out of her sight.

" No," she said.

" Only a moment, wherever you say? "

"No."

"Must I tell you here, in view of any one who cares to notice?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You ask?"

Craig's hands tightened upon his costume hat. "You are right. It was just to tell you, Jane, that I have given notice — I leave in two weeks."

Jane shivered. "I, too, have given notice."

Glance met glance, straight this time, steady, unflinching.

"No," said Craig, "it is Gordon's play. You must remain."

He was right; she dared not go.

For two more weeks they acted together, getting their interpretations across the footlights on the strength of cold, calculating technique alone. For two weeks Jane rehearsed "The Fire Opal" with the rest of the company for the instruction of the newly engaged

actor who had come to take Craig's place. Then finally, on a Wednesday night, came Craig's last performance. There was no calculating technique about that. The knowledge that he was about to lose her moved him powerfully, shocked him for once out of his indolent ways, and with Jane to play up to, he put a fire into his performance that would have startled Gaston into a new idea of his reliable leading man.

Jane, for her part, was equally aroused. It was undeniable that they struck fire from each other, and to-night, although the Jane who watched her playing counterpart from above felt her mastery of the situation, the Jane who played the Fire Opal let herself go.

When the last curtain had fallen, sending home men and women uncannily moved, extraordinarily impressed, Craig and Jane met off stage. Their performance had unnerved them. Tears were running down her cheeks in rivulets of kohl and rouge, and his eyes were

unnaturally bright. Jane extended a hand cold as ice, that was swallowed up in his hot palm.

"Good-by," she whispered. "Good-by — dear."

He gripped her hands with a powerful clasp, wondering if they would ever stand together like that again. Was it really possible they might never meet again!

"No, no," she breathed, striving to draw away. "Please!" They were in the shadow of some property palms, and Craig leaned forward hotly.

"Kiss me, Jane, kiss me! I can't go away without it. . . . I won't hurt you, girl! I must . . . Ah, come to me, just once for good-by."

But he was too late. Emotions were under control in Jane, and duty was very clear before her eyes. She held him off with warding hands, and a scene-shifter came upon them with a "Beg pardon, Mr. Greene wants them

palms." Jane blessed him, and fled, she knew not how.

The motto of Blanquette de Veau became hers in the succeeding days. "Life's hard, is it not, Messieurs?" She went on living, although she sometimes wondered if her heart had not stopped beating. Listlessly she went through the routine of her work, striving night after night to gain respite from suffering in sleep. Craig still haunted her body, but as the days went by she found herself feeling less keenly, often forgetting him for hours together, and realizing only a dull, unrecognizable ache. Curiously enough, it was Bryce whose image was before her mind more often now, and she caught herself contrasting his unselfishness and tenderness with Craig's vivid passion, until she grew to have a horror of what had been for the hour so recklessly sweet. Breathlessly she struggled to analyze herself, and failed. In her heart was only a baffling mystery, a mystery that pained.

The box office, however, continued to sell tickets, and there were people who still demanded entertainment; there were theaters all over the country crying for bookings, and Chicago was asking for "The Fire Opal." Gaston had been waiting for the opportunity.

The bulletin notice of the new booking shocked Jane into action. Chicago! Her family, her friends! She must put new life into her part, must show them that Bryce's play was a great play and she was a true actress. Gaston and Bryce were to meet the company there, and she must not disappoint them. It gave her something to work for, and dragged her mind away from her brooding.

Her coming was heralded in all the newspapers, invitations piled up in the Chicago theater; there was a note from Mrs. Van Mueller, asking when she might give a reception in Jane's honor, and a letter from her mother asking Jane to live at home.

Home! Jane read the note over half a dozen times with an expression in her eyes that was almost cynical. Forgiveness would have meant so much to her a few months ago; now it hardly stirred her. They had said no word when she and Bryce had failed, but now that she was successful, now that the world was at her feet, they, too, were ready to bow. The irony of success cut Jane like a lash.

It was Saturday afternoon, and no one knew that "The Fire Opal" company had slipped into town. Gaston and Bryce were to arrive Sunday morning. Jane had the day to herself, and laying the notes down, she ordered a taxi, and sent for Ludwig Darenbeck. Of all Chicago, she thought to herself bitterly, his was the one face she cared to see again.

He came post haste, both hands out, his big voice hearty with welcome.

"How do you do?" he greeted warmly. "Welcome home. Indeed, we have grown up in this year of ours, have we not?"

He held her hands for a moment, searching her face gravely.

"Ah, yes," he said gently. "Very much older, wiser, — happier, too, is it not so?"

"I — I don't know," Jane said slowly. "But at least I am glad it has all happened. How has it gone with you?"

She hardly needed to ask. Darenbeck was very evidently happy. His clothes were well-made and well-kept, Jane noted; his manner the manner of one with an assured position in the world. He was no longer thin, and his eyes smiled. The German was almost entirely gone from his speech, though he still had a foreign air that now appeared rather distinguished. At her question he nodded with satisfaction.

"You were my good luck, the turning of my tide," he said cheerily. "My symphony — your symphony, too, you remember — came to the Herr Direktor's eyes, and he found it good. He has it; it is to be played at your Ravinia

Park. I teach now; I have fine pupils. One boy, he plays — ach, beautifully! it is a pleasure to teach him. He will be a great man one of these days and all the world will flock to hear him. They are all good boys, and it is pleasant to see them so earnest, so eager; it is like the old country."

"And Mrs. Darenbeck — she is well?"

"But you should see! She has her garden and her chickens, and the children they go to school. Little Ludwig is in the kindergarten, and brings home — ach, such puzzles to make his father scratch the head! We have never been so happy since we were in the Fatherland. There is but one thing: if my symphony shall be played while you are still here, and we both go and hear it together, then shall I ask for no more."

He beamed at Jane contentedly, and she smiled back with a freedom and peace that she had not felt for weeks. For the moment she forgot to analyze, forgot to remember, forgot

everything in the sane, sensible, sunny personality of this big man who had gone through a life harder than anything she had ever known and taken it all as simply as the grass takes sunshine and rain.

"I have a taxi here," she told him. "I wanted to see the world again. Will you come with me? I have a lot of things to tell you."

"With pleasure," he said. "It is Saturday — I am out of school, too."

The big, purring six-cylinder spun down the smooth asphalt of Michigan Avenue, jolted through the tangle of trucks at the rickety old Rush Street bridge, felt its way among the warehouses beyond the river, and, picking up the Lake Shore Drive in Streeterville, settled down to a steady fifteen miles an hour over the oiled road. For awhile both Jane and Darenbeck were silent, feeling the fresh air on their faces, and watching the sail-dashed lake, for there was a fresh wind, and the big

yachts from the basin were scattered along the skyline with a host of smaller craft hanging on their heels.

Presently they passed the Carrington mansion, and Jane felt a throb of pain. There was no one in sight, but the familiar green awnings were up, the familiar collie asleep under the *porte-cochère.* Jane wanted to whistle to Laddie. It seemed as if she were just coming home from school, and in a minute would run up the back steps to forage in the kitchen for Sheila's cookies. But they passed in the flash of an eye, and Laddie still slept, the old front door remained closed. She sighed unconsciously, and Darenbeck, stirred by the slight sound, turned with a smile.

"Are you not going to tell me how it is you make the great success?" he asked. "I see the papers, yes. I hear the talk, yes. I know nothing. How did it come?"

"I hardly know myself," said Jane, hesitatingly. "It was n't all fun at first. I came

very near starving for awhile, and I thought it was all up with me once. You know all about that." She glanced at him, wondering if he had ever thought of putting out the gas, and he nodded.

"Ach, ja!" he laughed. "Once, I was so foolish — so young — I went and I looked at the river. He was black down there — b-r-r-r! he was cold. I was cold too, and I had no wish to be colder. So I went back to a restaurant and played the fiddle three hours for my dinner; after that I looked at the river no more. Ja, ja, I, too, have been young, and hungry. And then?"

"Well, I discovered that Broadway and Fifth Avenue are leagues apart; and for a time I believed myself the unhappy heroine in a thrilling melodrama, until I met Mr. Gordon — and we were married — and — well, one of his plays was accepted by Mr. Gaston, and I was given the lead, and he did everything for me — oh, there 's nobody like Mr. Gaston — and

the play was a success, and before I knew it things were going well."

Somehow it was not so easy to tell Darenbeck things as Jane had thought it would be. She had been eager to talk awhile ago, and now she could give only a bald, bare recital of facts. He looked out at the lake again, and puckered his forehead uneasily.

"And you are happy?" he said again. "You do not regret it?"

"Yes," said Jane slowly, "I am glad I went. But there are so many problems to solve."

He nodded soberly. "You must solve them for yourself now," he said. "It is no longer the scholar; it is the woman whom only life can teach. And there is the satisfaction that life is like scales; each one learned makes that you learn the next easier. Is it not?"

"I 'm afraid I have n't got far enough in the exercise-book to know yet," said Jane with a ghost of a smile. "I 'm still at the five-fingers, and I play them just as badly as I

used to when I was nine. Poor Mademoiselle Perette! I 'm afraid she wept many tears over me. In those days, I resented the piano bitterly."

"You should see how fierce I am to my little violin-boys," he answered, quickly picking up the change of key. "I growl at them so fierce when they do not play right, and they think I am a great bear. But inside I growl not at all. It is only that they must learn."

"The genius, too?"

"Ach, no! It is always 'go softly, Jan,' 'practice not so much, Jan,' 'rest thee, go and play.' He would work himself to death if I would let him, he loves the music so dearly. And now, Madame, will you of your goodness bid your chauffeur turn down this little street? If that you will eat supper with Minna and me, I shall be proud. We are simple folk — but there is always welcome for you."

The kindly sincerity of the invitation touched Jane, as Mrs. Van Mueller's cordial note

and her mother's urgent invitation had failed to do.

"I should love to," she said, with unmistakable sincerity. "I hated the thought of returning to the hotel, and there is nothing I should enjoy more than meeting Mrs. Darenbeck and the babies. How many are there, and what are their names? Do you think they will be afraid of me?"

"Perhaps a little shy at first. We see few strangers. But they will come to you, never fear."

The house was a small cottage in the midst of a garden well laid out for vegetables and flowers. Frau Darenbeck was a warm-hearted, motherly woman, who knew all about Jane from Ludwig, and seeing her tired, strained look, instantly took her into her arms, and gave her a generous kiss, and a welcome that was sweeter to Jane than a city's applause. In a trice, she was established in a broad-backed German chair, with a cushion behind her, a

glass of cordial in her hand, and a small tow-haired two-year-old with his thumb in his mouth making doubtful overtures to her from the shelter of a chenille table-cover.

"My Ludwig, he says he owes much to you, Mees Jane," affirmed Frau Darenbeck warmly. "Ach, such times when we first came to this America. He put away his symphony, and said he could write no more; there were no artists in America, and no music fit to play to a sick cat. When he went to that Schloss Van Mueller, I knew not where to turn; but he came back with his eyes all bright, and he say, 'Minna, liebes Herz, wo ist meine Symphonie? Nun schreibe ich!' And I get it and he play and he write like a crazy man. And I work and I make the ends meet, as you say here, and when it is done — ach, der Herr Direktor he say it is the work of a master — ja, and he hear Ludwig play, and he get him the pupils, and he took his music, and it is all you, who gave him back the Schaffensdrang,

and made him compose again. Long have I had the wish to thank you, and every night I have put you in my prayers along with Ludwig and the Kinder and the old folks in Deutschland. It is good that you are here."

She patted Jane on the shoulder with a comforting hand.

"Nun, I go to the kitchen and make supper. Heinrich, come thou and show the lady thy picture-book." And with that she disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, whence arose promptly the brisk clatter of tins and the odor of coffee.

Jane made friends with Heinrich, and presently with Ludwig and wee Minna, so that Darenbeck, coming suddenly into the room, discovered them all on the floor, where Ludwig of the kindergarten was teaching her the intricacies of pease-porridge-hot to the accompaniment of much laughter. Jane looked ten years younger than she had an hour ago, and

Darenbeck, getting down on the floor too with the ease of long familiarity, joined the pease-porridge-hot class with enthusiasm, although he insisted on reciting the rhyme in German, to the open delight of the junior Ludwig and the confusion of Jane.

From this diversion Frau Darenbeck rescued them with a call to a very appetizing supper, and after the meal, when the children were put to bed, Jane helped in unfamiliar delight with buttons and *Nachthosen.*

"I never knew they were so pretty when they were undressed," she said to Frau Darenbeck, as she lifted Minna out of the tub, wriggling. "Bless you, honey, you must n't eat the whole wash-rag. Lie still on the bath-towel, and I 'll tell you about 'this little pig went to market.'"

At last they were all in bed, the last prayer said, the last drink of water administered, the last story told, and Jane bethought her that it was miles back to Michigan Avenue.

"Truly I must go," she said, as they protested. "You don't know how much good this has done me, or how grateful I am to you and Herr Darenbeck. I shall remember this evening always, and if I may, I want to come again."

They went to the gate with her and helped her into the automobile, tucking her up warmly against the cool night air, and urging her with German hospitality to come again. The big car felt its way up the quiet lane, and turned into Sheridan Road, its strong lights piercing the dark night. Jane waved a last good-by, and was gone.

"She has the sad eyes, Ludwig," said Frau Darenbeck, walking up the path with her husband's arm about her. "It 's a pity that she has no children."

Speeding back to town through the quiet North Shore, Jane stared wide-eyed into the night, feeling again the weight of little Minna on her breast, the touch of the soft baby hands

on her face. Somehow since she had seen the contentment of the Darenbecks she felt that she had more to regret than she had realized, and every familiar landmark that she passed intensified the feeling. Here were the haunts of Jane Carrington, the girl; here she had lived, rebelled, laughed, suffered, yearned for fame. The same Jane had not returned; it was the actress enveloped in the mantle of the theater, colored by its glamour, seared with its memories, corroded with its emotions, surfeited with its mockery and sham. She had allowed the theater to claim her, body and soul, she thought; she was just beginning to understand fully what Craig had called lightly its ruinous fever, and to realize that although she had played life like a character part, there had come a time when she must wash off her make-up and show the self that lay beneath, unpainted and unadorned. Bryce was coming to-morrow — and to-morrow Bryce must know.

After that — what? Jane did not know. Darenbeck had asked her if she were happy. Happiness! She flung the word from her bitterly. It seemed to her that she had never before known pain.

CHAPTER XVII

Bryce was coming.

Jane woke with the thought, after a few hours of exhausted sleep. Three hours more and she must meet his gaze. What was her life to be after that? How would he take her confession? Even then, on the train speeding towards Chicago, Bryce was probably thinking of her and looking forward to their meeting. If she could only creep into his gentle protecting arms once more and let the trouble of existence slip from her wearied shoulders, she felt that she would never want to move again. Just once she would do it, she argued with herself, — just once, and then she would tell him everything. After that . . . well, she scarcely dared hope. Heavily she rose, dressed herself, and made a pretense at breakfast.

As the train pulled into the steel-ribbed station with clangor and escaping steam, and the long vista of the platform became crowded with hurrying figures, Gaston and Bryce came to her, the former travel-weary but benign, the latter with eyes only for one figure by the iron gates. Jane looked at him as at a stranger. This straight, slim fellow with the positive manner, the smiling mouth and eyes, the air of success in the very cut of his clothes — was this Bryce Gordon?

"Jane!" he said simply.

She clung to him like a child. The time might be so short. As for Bryce, he was glad to have her cling to him, glad of her beauty and her weight on his arm, at peace with the world. If he noticed that she was by turns full of inconsequent chatter and strangely silent, he made no sign. But when they reached their rooms, he held her at arm's length and scrutinized her with the eyes of a man for whom there is but one woman.

"What have they been doing to you, Jane?" he said with half playful tenderness. "Your mouth is down at the corners, and your eyes — why, little girl!" For her eyes had suddenly helplessly filled with tears.

For a moment she laid her face on his shoulder, unconsciously noting the familiar scent of tobacco, and then gently pushed him away. She had no right there — now.

"I 've something to tell you, Bryce," she said gravely. "It 's not easy. Suppose we sit down."

He placed a chair by the table, and sat down facing her.

"Well, what 's the Golden Text?" he began, trying to break the tension, but she shook her head with a wan attempt at a smile.

"Bryce, do you love me?"

"My dear!" He made a movement as if to gather her in his arms, but she put up a warding hand.

"Very much? Enough to — forgive?"

"Forgive?" His face changed, lines settling about the mouth. "Forgive what?"

She shrank and shook her head.

"Ah, I knew it. . . . But I must tell you. I can't be with you and keep it hidden. . . . They say a woman ought never to tell the truth to a man. . . . Bryce, whatever comes, I want you to remember I've always told you the truth."

"Of course you have, Jane. That is one of the reasons why you're such a good scout. You never dodge. Now, little girl, out with it. Tell me what's wrong." His voice was easy, gentle, but his eyes roved anxiously over her, and the muscles at the angle of his jaw bulged ever so slightly.

"I wish I'd waited till after dark. It would have been easier, I think. . . . Well, I've been lonely. It's been months since I've had any home but my trunk, any human being I could call my friend. If you'd come with me — but you were a thousand miles off, and one can't

exist on letters. At least they 're pretty cold comfort, when you want some one that 's real and breathing. You know? "

He nodded. " I know."

" I was starved — hungry for a word, a look, a little bit of petting. . . . What did you do Christmas Day? "

" I was at the Schuylers', knee-deep in children and Teddy-bears."

" I was in San Francisco, all soul alone. It was gray as dish-water. Nobody invited me to have so much as a cup of tea. One gets tired on tour — blue, miserable, desolate. I was all of that. I was a fool, Bryce. But — I suppose everybody has an hour between the devil and the deep sea. I had mine then."

" Who was he? " The voice was very quiet.

" Is that necessary? "

" Who was he? " This time it was a command.

" Craig," said Jane, her face in her hands.

" Ah! "

She sprang to her feet and faced him.

"It is n't what you think — it is n't, it is n't! Believe me! We did n't go over the edge. Bryce! If I ever told you the truth I 'm telling it now. I 'd fought it unconsciously for a long time — not love, but a sort of crazy attraction — and it had worn me out. And we had good friendly times together, and there was n't any one else who talked my language, and — well, it was all so new that I did n't see where it was leading. Self-control under stress — don't I deserve a rag of credit for that?"

"Just what do you mean by 'not going over the edge'?"

"Why — that I did n't — no, I mean that he kissed me — that I kissed him — that I *felt* when he was near, was attracted — oh, I 'm ashamed! — but no more. Oh, Bryce, why did n't you come with me?"

"Would that have helped?"

"Yes!" Jane's face was hidden again. "I

think it would, I 'm sure it would; when I was alone you seemed so very far away; it was n't so much that I forgot myself — as that I forgot — you, and now, oh, Bryce — I 'm miserable!"

There was a silence in the room. Slowly Bryce rose, and parting the flimsy curtains gazed down on the gay Roman ribbon of Michigan Avenue, the only highway of its kind in the world. Like shining beetles the automobiles flashed and darted on the dark pavement; like a patterned border the women's dresses starred the sidewalk — cerise, violet, blue. Often Bryce had looked upon the pageant and wondered what was behind the bright eyes that passed without a glance for the shabby author, under the stylish corsages, where, pinned among the furs, lay an orchid that cost more than his day's meals. Heartaches were indecent as bodies down there, things to be padded and stitched and altered out of recognition by one's tailor. He had

thought Jane different from other women. He slowly drew a deep breath and exhaled it soundlessly. The illusion that had made life sweet was gone.

As for Jane, she sat by the table and looked dumbly at his straight back. It was no longer Jane the actress; it was Jane the woman who had come to life, a Jane who cared no longer whether she played her puppets well or ill, but only a primitive woman calling for her mate and her life. She knew now where her pathway led, she said to herself, now that it was perhaps too late.

Bryce at the window absently lighted a cigarette, and she noted with a pang that he did not ask her permission. But he could not smoke, — his throat was too dry, — and he turned to meet her pleading, wistful eyes. There was no answer in his own, and she shrank into herself.

"Is that all you have to tell me?" he asked dryly.

She nodded — she did not dare to speak.

"Are you quite sure?" he repeated. "We don't want to have any left-overs in this. Is there anything you want to tell me about yourself, leaving Craig out of it?"

She was silent, and he took it for coldness. Carefully he laid down the cigarette, not noticing that it had gone out.

"For instance," he suggested, "what do you intend to do now?"

"I — I have made no plans."

"You intend, therefore, to go on as before? To live as we've been doing?"

"No."

"Divorce, then?"

Her look was answer enough. Jane had been taught to regard divorce as anathema.

"You prefer separation?"

She sat quiet, with lids dropped. Suddenly Bryce's hard-held control snapped.

"What do you want, then?" he blazed at her. "If you've stopped what you've been

pleased to call caring for me, do you want to go on with this pretense of a marriage we've been putting up? Or do you want your freedom? You know, of course, that Craig's married and supposed to be devoted to his wife?"

She laid her cheek on her outstretched arm, like a weary child, and shut her eyes. She was very tired.

"I don't want anything, Bryce," she said with an effort. "I had hoped that I might — that — but never mind now. You are quite right to cast me off, I know. Just do what suits yourself. . . . I'm sorry I've made such a mess of your life."

He stared at her, sudden pity welling up in him, and some strange sweet emotion, that at the moment he could not define.

"You hoped what, Jane?" he asked. His voice was cool. "What did you mean?"

"I — I —" The hand that had hung limp at her side came up to hide her face now, and

when she spoke it was with a choked and uneven voice that he hardly recognized. "I hoped that — that maybe you 'd let me tell you I 'd learned — to love you at last."

"Yes?" he said evenly, and for an instant he stood looking at her bent head. In that instant it flashed clearly upon him that on his next sentence depended their whole future relations, and he smiled with a quiet bitterness sadder than tears. The goddess he had fashioned out of his dreams had crashed to earth, and in her stead was left only a woman, whom he loved most deeply in spite of her folly, but who had failed pitifully to fill that heroic mould. He had learned a great deal in the last few minutes, and that knowledge was reflected in his voice when he spoke. "A little late, are n't you?"

Jane said nothing, but kept her face hidden miserably in her hands. It was very evidently a new Bryce that had come to Chicago, a Bryce that no longer needed her, no longer

hung upon her words. She had always felt a sort of protecting maternalism where he was concerned, and now he was suddenly stronger than she, coolly independent of her, apparently not at all moved by either her confession or her love. She felt like a mother whose son has suddenly come back from college a head taller than she and quite capable of managing his own affairs. What had happened? Was it merely that he had learned to do without her now that he was so successful, or had she by her folly lost him forever? A month ago, she knew, he would have sold his soul to hear her say she loved him with real truth in her voice. Now it seemed to leave him unmoved, and with the knowledge that he was stronger than she came a recognition of his power that she felt and of necessity bent before. Their positions with relation to each other had executed a *volte-face.*

"Well, anyway, I told you the truth about it," she said. "And — and I do love you,

Bryce. Craig took me by surprise, or I 'd never have — "

" I 'll settle with Craig later," he said briefly, cutting her short. " If you want to stay by the ship, and obey orders, well and good. If you don't, well and good also. Only you 've got to decide here and now which you want to do; and once decided, you 've got to stick by your decision. Is that clear? "

" Very," she said. " I 'll stay."

" And obey orders? "

She hesitated half a second. " Yes."

" You 're quite clear on that point? "

" Yes."

" All right. Now you 'd better go and lie down before rehearsal and see if you can't make your eyes look natural. I don't want people to think I 've been beating you. I 've some business to attend to, and I probably shall not be back until dinner."

Jane gathered herself together and went. Bryce on his part left the hotel, and turning

up Michigan Avenue walked miles in the fresh wind, taking counsel with himself and a cigar.

That night at dinner Jane offered to leave the stage. It was her last card, and she played it hopefully, expecting to see his eyes light up with something of the old look. Instead, he took another olive and changed the subject.

"You 're succeeding very well now," he said pleasantly. "It seems to me that Gaston has done even better than usual with 'Opal.' The houses have been packed everywhere, have n't they?"

"Yes," said Jane briefly, choking back the tears.

"I was taking up my new play with him on the train," he continued, with the air of one imparting politely friendly news. "It seemed to appeal to him, and as soon as I return to New York I shall get it into shape for him to read."

Jane nodded assent, and sipped at her glass

of ice-water. After a moment she returned to her attack.

"But truly, Bryce, I meant it," she said. "I want to leave the stage and try to make up to you a little. I — "

He signaled their waiter, without appearing to hear her remark, and asked him about the wild duck.

"You 'll have some, won't you?" he asked her with courtesy. "I understand they 're especially good."

She shook her head, and presently making an excuse left the table. She had made her play and lost, and in the seclusion of her room she gave way to hysterical tears.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I just received a wire from Craig," said Gaston the next morning, as he met Jane in the theater at eleven o'clock. "He is coming on the Flyer, and will be here for the opening to-night. What possessed the fellow to throw up his part in California and chase south for his health, I don't know. Sloane can't come up to him in it, and Greene tells me his acting is n't reliable. Greene was a fool to let Craig go; if I had had time to run west, I could have induced him to stay. But with all the complications we have had in New York this winter I am lucky to get as far as Chicago."

"I think your going west would not have changed matters," said Jane quietly. "When you talk to the company, Mr. Gaston, you will hear rumors about Craig — and me."

Gaston shook his head and waved his hands in careless dissent.

"Pshaw! Some one will always talk. Craig was too good a player to lose. He came into my office in New York last week, with his usual debonair way, and told me the same thing. Said he thought he had to get out to make it pleasant for you. I told him that was rot — he 's just lazy again. I 'm glad he 's coming to-night. It gives me another chance at him."

Jane shrank. Must she see him again? Why was he coming to-night? Had he not spoiled enough — her innocence — Bryce's happiness; if he came to-night might he not wreck her dream of reparation? What would Bryce do? For a moment she considered telling Gaston all, and asking him to send Craig away. But she stifled that thought before it was born. Where the success of the play was concerned, Gaston was deaf as Zeus to prayer.

Just then, Bryce came in. She nodded to him gravely. Gaston flashed quick eyes from

one to the other, and, drawing his own conclusions, shook his rough-maned head impatiently.

"Good morning, Mr. Gaston — when did you get down?"

"Now, young man, it is nothing to you what time I got down," said Gaston, "but it is everything to all of us that you and your wife kiss and make up. Yes, I've heard a lot of stuff, and I don't want particulars; all I know is that I have an emotional, temperamental leading woman, who has to be cared for, and I would n't keep her if she were otherwise. I 'm planning for the success of the play — and, by the way, sir, it happens to be your play."

Quickly, and yet with a certain pitying tenderness, Gaston took a hand of each and closed them together.

"There," he said. "Life 's short enough as it is; understand each other and forgive. Now take her off to her dressing-room and — think it over."

The color surged up over Jane's pale face,

and she cast at Bryce a glance that said, "Let things seem right." Gaston nodded approvingly, misreading it; and Bryce, biting off the sentence rising to his lips, led Jane away.

"I 've been thinking this over, Jane," he began directly when the door of her dressing-room had closed upon them, "and I can't allow you to make any such sacrifice for me as leaving the stage would be. . . . No; listen." He checked her attempt at interruption. "I 've quite made up my mind. It was made up yesterday, though you were so worn out that I did n't want to disturb you about it then. No, Jane; the theater is your work and your life. You may think you 'd be content in a home, but you never would. You 're not made that way."

She made a passionate gesture of casting it all from her.

"I don't want it any more. It 's ashes and dust — Dead Sea apples. I 've added the curse of Adam to the curse of Eve, and thought I 'd

made myself free. I want to be a plain woman, with only my husband for an audience. I want to start new."

He shook his head.

"I know you better than you know yourself, Jane. We 'll drop it; the thing 's quite settled. I 'll see you between acts."

Gently he bent and kissed her on the forehead. She clung to him, but after a moment he disengaged her arms.

Outside the door he paused, his hand still on the knob, and sighed. He too had had his dreams of a home.

Jane's thoughts followed him. So he could not trust her to do it. She was to be kindly silenced like a child that has offered to get the moon for a wiser elder. This was Craig's doing. Craig! She ground her teeth in a sudden unreasoning frenzy of rage. He had come like a slimy snail, spoiling everything he touched. Oh, he had been careful to cover himself — probably he was afraid of what

Bryce would do when he found it out. Craig was a chemist of emotions, who was careful to keep his own fingers out of any acids. It made no difference to him how they scorched into her soul. He had played with her, had an hour's amusement with her torture, like a schoolboy with a beetle on a pin. Now he had wrecked her life, and perhaps Bryce's as well, and for his own selfish pleasure. Bryce was incomprehensible in his attitude; she had thought she knew him, but all her efforts at reconciliation met with a blank politeness as unscalable as a granite wall. Gentle enough, to be sure; but what lay behind that gentleness? Jane stared at herself in her mirror. "You were a little fool," she told herself bitterly; "but Craig led you on. He knew what he was doing. He knew how to use his fascinations when you were a stranger in his mimic world. He never loved you at all. And Bryce —"

Jane put her head down on the dressing-

table. She knew better than to believe that Bryce wanted her to remain on the stage. It was like him to refrain from refusing her offer yesterday when she was unstrung. "I 'd probably have cried into the soup," she reflected with a gleam of ironical humor. Anyway, that avenue was stopped. She could do no more; Bryce must make the next move. She fell to wondering what Bryce would do when Craig came. She was afraid of this new quiet man with the decision in his manner, this man who gave her orders that he expected to have obeyed. As for Craig —

"I hate him!" she said to her mirror. "I hate him from the bottom of my soul."

But the bottom of Jane's soul was not yet reached. When the probe of life goes down into the shrinking flesh, women of her type are prone to believe that every additional quarter of an inch is the last depth, and that they can suffer no more. At the bottom of her soul she still loved the theater best; and she had

been playing when she offered Bryce her sacrifice, though she would have denied it strenuously even to herself. There had been one eye approvingly upon the mirror, an eye securely screened, an eye that she perhaps even fancied wept. Had Bryce been less keen an analyst of humanity, he might also have been deceived. But it was even as he had said. He knew Jane better now than she realized, and with a shrewd and pitying generosity had left her the pride of having offered without the humiliation of having failed. Further than that human nature could not go.

So she sat in her dressing-room and was wretched. Once she sent a note to Bryce, asking him to come to her. The messenger returned with the information that Mr. Gordon had gone out without leaving word when he would return. At last she realized that if she did not rest she would not be at her best in the play, and, relaxing, she went wearily to sleep.

The Carrington family, including Leslie and her husband, Walter Scribner, occupied the stage box that evening. Had they realized the ordeal they put Jane to, they would have taken seats in the orchestra beyond her range of vision, but their choice had been actuated by their intense desire to show her their good will. They had sent roses, as other friends had done, and on a card enclosed had written her to come back to them. They had looked forward to the moment when their eyes should meet across the footlights, but when the moment came, it was one of the terrible incidents of life. Mutual shame, mortification and contrition bound their eyelids; there was a silent mutual forgiveness, but no direct glance.

In answer to the applause with which the city greeted her, Jane ran her eyes across the house to the opposite box, where Mrs. Van Mueller was nodding to her, then back to the gallery and down. She had not dared to ask about Craig. Had he come? She could not

see him. She hoped he had stayed away; it was the decent thing for him to do, she told herself. He had wronged her enough. Then she lost herself in the lines.

Gaston met her in the wings as she came off.

"It 's going splendidly," he said eagerly. "I never saw you play so well. You 've been learning life since you were in New York."

"Where 's Craig?" She had not meant to ask it.

"I have n't seen him — he was to arrive on the Flyer."

"The Flyer, Mr. Gaston?" asked an electrician standing near. "Why, the paper said the Flyer was wrecked just out of Cleveland. Was Mr. Craig on that?"

"Wrecked?" Jane snapped the word at him like a lash.

"I got an extra here," and he pulled a newspaper from the stool where he had been sitting. "I did n't read the particulars."

Gaston snatched at it. His eyes sped down

the columns with the black lists of the dead; then the paper fell from his hand. Jane stooped for it.

"Don't look! You have to play — don't look!"

"He is hurt?"

"Yes."

Jane's eyes darkened. "Tell me he is n't dead! — tell me he is n't dead! — tell me — Gaston!" She shook him by the shoulders. "Gaston, look into my eyes and tell me he is n't dead! You hesitate — you can't? It 's true, then! It 's true!"

White to the lips Jane faced him, and slowly he bent his head in assent. But it was not at him she was looking. Her eyes were wide and far away, gazing upon the vision of Craig dead, with the blood matting his dark hair, the lips she had kissed in that vanished passion turned impotently up to the sky. He had paid the price for her weakness, her faithlessness to herself; had gone up to whatever bar there

might be above to answer alone for their sin. She was still living — she who had been equally guilty, she who had been bitterly reproaching him only a moment ago. The blood rose in a scarlet tide of shame to her cheeks, and for the first time in her life she looked squarely into her own soul and saw its pitiful futility. Truly, the fever of the theater had eaten into her, she thought, and to it she had sacrificed all. Swiftly they flashed before her, the faces of her mother and father, whom she had hurt so cruelly, the brief voice of Bryce, as he had told her she must remain on the stage, the dead face of Craig, and lastly, her own comfortable, well-fed self, that had gone placidly on and used them all as experience material, had climbed up on their prostrate bodies. She looked at herself longest and took no comfort in the view. She had held herself good, and looked pityingly down upon the poor souls that had gone astray; she had even magnanimously forgiven them when they had touched the hem of her dress.

She had blamed her own weakness on Craig, had pharisaically held back her skirts and was glad that she was not even as he was. She! It was her own guilt, her own shame. What was she to dare to forgive, to pity? What was she that Bryce should love her, now that at last she realized his worth, now that at last she knew her own?

Gaston watched her sharply, wondering if she were going to faint. But presently he saw that she had no intention of fainting, and waited silently. It was not the first time he had seen a soul in the crucible, and beheld it emerge with the dross refined away, or crumble and melt into nothing.

Suddenly the faintly heard orchestra ceased, and by one of those curious coincidences of silence every other sound for a brief moment hushed into a stillness wherein a single moth fluttering about the electric light could plainly be heard beating its wings. Jane woke from a reverie that had lasted perhaps three minutes,

but in which she had traveled a cycle of human years, after which she would never be the same again, and became conscious of Gaston's kindly sympathetic eyes. For a moment they stared at each other, and then Jane broke into a brusque little laugh that was on the border-line of tears.

"I 've just discovered that all my life I 've been a monumentally selfish fool," she said.

He nodded cheerfully.

"Good," he said, with satisfaction. "That 's all you needed to teach you how to play Opal. Now go on — the audience is waiting."

But for once Gaston failed to strike the right note, and Jane blazed up with the suddenness of a red danger-flare.

"Opal!" she cried hotly. "I 've discovered myself — not anything about Opal. I 've learned what a colossal, blundering fool I 've been to play Opal at all, to sacrifice to the Moloch of the theater all my life. I 'll sacri-

fice no more. I 've ruined my life and Bryce's, and now I 'm going to pick up the pieces if I can. I tell you I don't want to play Opal; I want Bryce; I want my husband — if I have n't lost him forever. I want to make up to him for what I have not been to him; I want to be a plain, ordinary, natural woman; and neither Opal nor anything else is going to stand in my way."

Without giving the astonished Gaston time to reply, Jane turned towards the wings and went swiftly on in answer to her cue.

Watching her walk through the forest of pasteboard trees, he was suddenly startled by her laugh, — a clear, joyous laugh. There was something intoxicating in her mirth, something reckless in her abandonment to all the fine shades of comedy, something so childish in her manner, so exhilarating in her humor, so sympathetic and understanding in her pathos, that the audience woke with a start, and, before the scene was over, were laughing and crying

indiscriminately, lifted irresistibly out of themselves.

The company responded electrically, suddenly dragged to the heights of the drama by the nervous tension and powerful personal magnetism of the woman at their head. None spoke to her during the intermission, none crossed her path, none uttered a word or made a motion that might break the inspiration that seemed to have taken an almost supernatural hold upon her.

Then as the play turned from the light ways of comedy, Jane plunged from pathos to tragedy, crushing with the weight of her despair, sweeping everything before her in the rush of her emotions, bending everything before her genius, tossing the audience to and fro on the waves of her passion until they rose shouting from their seats in a frenzy of enthusiasm.

She came before the curtain in answer to their calls, panting and weak now that the

night's work was completed, smiling at their homage, but bowing exhaustedly, as if oppressed with the weight of their approval, as if wearied by the storm of their applause.

The next night an electric sign flashed the name of "Jane Carrington" from the portico of the theater.

Gaston had made her a star.

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